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MARRIAGE OF MRS. MERLIN

CHARLES STOKES WAYNE

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" Understanding the conditions, I accept."
Frontispiece. Page 67

The Marriage of Mrs. Merlin

By
Charles Stokes Wayne
Author of "A Prince to Order," Etc.

Illustrations by
Louis F. Grant

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Issued September, 1907.

The Marriage of
Mrs. Merlin

To

Robert J. Collier

In grateful appreciation of his confidence.

ILLUSTRATIONS

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The Marriage of Mrs. Merlin

I

THE drawing rooms were all gold. From fretted ceiling and arabesqued frieze to cushioned ottoman and carved console the glittering glory prevailed. Even on the dazzling white ground of the heavy pile Axminster glowed golden-hued medallions, while over all, filtered through topaz-tinted globes, fell the yellow lustre in a Pactolean flood. The ostentation born of opulence stared from every detail. It was the house of Midas; but Midas with the ass's ears.

In the middle drawing room Eames was singing, and there was a pretence of silence on the part of those gathered there, but in the other rooms the chatter went on in an even louder and more strident key than before the singing began. There had been unlimited champagne at dinner, and tongues thus loosed were not to be fettered by decorum, nor even by the knowledge that Midas had paid more than a thousand dollars for the diva's two arias.

The company was somewhat heterogeneous. It was, indeed, an odd conglomerate of "the vulgar great, the vainly rich and the miserable proud." An Irish-American millionaire, high in the councils of Tammany, gossiped Wall Street flotsam with a trust magnate, their pon-

derous black figures silhouetted against the gold brocade portières of the doorway in which they had halted; the scapegrace scion of an old Knickerbocker family told blushful stories to an opera bouffe prima donna out of an engagement, while the owner of a racing stable, a small, dark man of Semitic features, related to the much bejeweled wife of an army officer, whose husband was in the Philippines, how he was going to win the next Suburban with a wonderful gelding he had been shrewdly keeping from public view.

The women were richly, but as a rule rather too garishly costumed, with a superabundance of gems and here and there an excess of rouge. They were of the sort that frequent even if they do not make a rendezvous of the Waldorf-As-

toria palm room at the tea hour, and are to be found lunching occasionally at Martin's; and the men, while well-groomed and fairly well-mannered, were of the class that seldom reach, seldom indeed aspire to the supreme gentlemanly distinction of enrolment upon the rosters of such clubs as the Union and the Knickerbocker.

It was a gathering thoroughly representative of a certain stratum of modern society in the great American metropolis —a stratum whereof a prosperous present and an indifference to past are vital principles; a stratum eminently respectable, judged by its own somewhat lax rules, just as it is eminently fashionable, regarded from its own egotistical standpoint, but several laminae removed, never-

theless, from that more precious and august social layer which years ago the late lamented Mr. McAllister denominated "The Four Hundred."

Against this glowing golden background, framed by this social harlequinade, Leila Merlin presented at once the most exquisite and the most dominant picture in the rooms. She occupied the corner of a divan, and she was making a brave effort to concentrate thought and hearing upon the singer whose rich, full, liquid notes were to her the one compensation for several hours of uncongenial environment. Throughout the seemingly endless dinner, with its multiplicity of courses, served by lackeys in powdered wigs and pale blue liveries, she had been bored unspeakably, and in the per-

iod intervening, before the arrival of the diva, surrounded by an insistent group of more or less ardent masculine admirers, her *ennui* had intensified until the weariness of her soul forced itself, in spite of rebellion, into her clear gray, expressive eyes and hung its banners on the corners of her softly curved, red-lipped, sensitive, mouth. Her hair was almost black, with here and there a glint of burnished copper, and her complexion ivory and pale rose. It was not, however, in her coloring nor in the perfection of her features that her superiority was most evident, but rather in an aristocratic refinement of expression and dignity of poise. She was tall, too, of slender, graceful figure, and in a wonderfully simple gown of rich creamy Mechlin lace,

her bare neck girt by a string of perfectly matched pearls, she carried an air of distinction that set her apart from and above her surroundings.

Into this *milieu* Leila Merlin had drifted through circumstances: more from disinclination to seek a more exalted elevation than from unfitness to adorn the best places. A product of the West, with a European finish and preference, she had regarded the New York world of fashion as something separate and apart, and of too narrow and bigoted a philosophy to hold for her any personal attraction. Her native indolence, coupled with a broad-minded, charitable disregard of restrictive conventions, had made an effort for entrance into the social holy of holies, not merely unworth the trying,

but rather a subject for half-indifferent amusement. And smart Manhattan had in turn tilted its aristocratic nose, and given reasons over its teacups why Mrs. Merlin, "that Californian, who, *etc., etc.,*" was quite impossible.

Now a middle-aged man, a trifle undersized and slightly bald, an enormous black pearl blotting the centre of his bulging shirt front, had flung himself down beside her on the divan and was chattering volubly to her in rather thick-tongued accents and with a manner that defied discouragement. Preoccupation and monosyllabic replies had failed utterly to stem the tide of his lingual enthusiasm, and Leila, striving vainly to listen to the divine Eames, yet unwilling to commit an obvious rudeness, was well-

nigh distraught with nervous vexation.

More than once she cast appealing glances about the room, realizing even as she did so the hopelessness of finding, in such a gathering, appreciation of her dilemma.

"Rather a mistake, after all, having singing," her unwelcome companion was saying, "a fellow can hardly hear himself talk, and it's insufferably stupid at an affair of this sort to sit and twiddle your thumbs, especially when there are so many beautiful women to talk with. Eames is all right enough, to be sure. She comes high and we must have her, but——"

"I beg your pardon."

At the interruption Leila glanced up. The apologist had approached from behind and stood now at her side address-

ing that talkative person who had usurped unbidden the larger share of her divan. She noticed that he was fair and very tall, with broad, square shoulders, and that his voice was pleasantly modulated.

"I beg your pardon," he repeated, smiling, and then in lowered tone that he might not be overheard: "A lady has fainted in the library and they wish you to come at once."

The little man got hurriedly to his feet.

"Sorry to have to leave you," he murmured to Mrs. Merlin, while to the messenger, as he strode pompously away he mumbled a word of thanks.

The incident, which occupied the briefest possible moment, was apparently unnoticed by the rest of the company, and Leila, with a sigh of relief, gave herself

up wholly to the enjoyment of the aria from Mozart's *"Cosi fan tutti."*

At the conclusion of the singing there was the usual applause in which those who had heard least joined the loudest. In the midst of this the voluble chatterer returned, his face very red, his brow furrowed.

"Which way did he go?" he asked, with some excitement. Mrs. Merlin's eyes propounded a question in return.

"Why, Blount," he replied, reading the query, "you know; the fellow that sent me off on a wild goose chase."

"A wild goose chase?" she repeated, amused.

"Yes, you heard him, didn't you? Said a lady had fainted in the library and that I——"

"Oh, yes, to be sure. And you couldn't find her?"

"For the best of reasons," he answered, with indignation. "No lady fainted. My brother was there; had been for the last hour, reading the evening paper, and he told me he had had the room to himself all that time."

Leila with difficulty smothered a smile.

"Most inexplicable," she commented.

"You don't remember which way he went?"

"Really, Mr. Hammond, I haven't the faintest notion. Did I understand you to say his name is Blount?"

"Blount, yes. An Englishman. A no-good Englishman, too, I hear. How in Heaven's name Edith came to take him up, I don't understand."

Mrs. Merlin's amusement increased. To her the object of Mr. Blount's hoax was transparently clear.

"I thought him rather good looking," she ventured. A chance had come to avenge herself for the annoyance she had suffered at Hammond's tongue, and she was availing herself of it. The irritating effect of this observation she could readily foresee.

"Humph!" he muttered, with a sneer, "good looks are excellent capital for a woman, but a man can't raise much on such collateral."

"He is evidently a gentleman," she continued, intent on mischief.

"Our ideas of gentlemen differ, then, Mrs. Merlin. I don't call a fellow a gentleman who plays practical jokes. It

takes more than good looks and good clothes and good address to make a gentleman to my way of thinking, and I propose to tell Blount so."

"You think with Chaucer that 'he is gentle that doth gentle deeds'?"

Mr. Hammond shrugged his shoulders.

"He isn't gentle that plays practical jokes," he insisted, and then, more nettled even than when he came, he went off to continue his search.

Leila's amusement over Tommy Hammond's irritation was more than equaled by her interest in Mr. Blount's cleverness. Her distress had certainly been sufficiently obvious, and yet he alone apparently had observed it. At all events he alone had thought it worth while to come to her relief, and for this service she was exceed-

ingly grateful. But the ingenuity, not to say boldness, with which her rescue was effected, won her deepest interest and admiration.

She had determined to follow the singing with her leave-taking, but this turn of events changed her plans, and when, a little later, Neely Van Dam, the Knickerbocker scion, chanced her way she asked him to hunt up Mr. Blount, and present him.

"You haven't met him?" the youngster asked in surprise.

"No," she answered, "you know he was one of those that came in after dinner."

"I don't see what that has to do with it. He isn't a blind man and—— Tell me," he said, interrupting himself, "is

there another man here that has not been presented?"

She laughed. "No," she admitted, "I don't believe there is."

"I thought not; I saw the way they besieged you. I wonder where Dickie Blount was at the time. He surely must have been in chains somewhere. He'll be awfully set up to know you asked to have him presented."

"Don't tell him, then; ask him on your own responsibility. I wouldn't add to a man's vanity for worlds."

"I shouldn't call him vain; really I shouldn't," Neely protested, seriously. "Blount's a very good sort, don't you know. One of the kind that does everything devilishly well, and never crows. He knows more about a motor than any

chauffeur I've ever run across; he's a perfectly ripping pigeon shot; and he sailed a boat in the Larchmont regatta last summer and made the old salts up there look like a bunch of rag babies."

"Yes," she said, stroking her fan—a big fan of white ostrich feathers, "I fancied he did things well. Now run along and find him, that's a good boy."

As he sauntered away Edith Hammond joined her.

"You've been bored, haven't you? Now don't deny it, I saw it in your face; and your face doesn't lie."

"On the contrary," persisted Leila, "I have been more than usually entertained. Eames sang divinely, and——"

"And what? Really, my dear, you're incorrigible. If I didn't know better I'd

be sure that this being continually and everlastingly *ennuyé* was a pose."

"But I'm not continually and everlastingly *ennuyé*. On the other hand, I have been most delightfully distracted. I have had a distinctly new sensation."

Mrs. Hammond's blue eyes opened wide in feigned amazement.

"Impossible," she cried, incredulously. "If you were any other woman than yourself I should ask his name."

"In which case," Leila responded, "the other woman, if she told the truth, would answer, Blount."

"Really!"

"Beyond the shadow of a doubt."

"He's a find of mine, you know."

"So your husband told me. He doesn't altogether approve of him."

Mrs. Hammond's carefully penciled brows were elevated just a trifle.

"Doesn't he?" she said, with more than a shade of indifference in her tone; "I didn't know that he knew him."

"Oh, yes; they have met," Leila affirmed, smiling. "Mr. Hammond does not care for Mr. Blount's style of humor."

"Good Heavens!" laughed Edith, the sapphires on her neck dancing an accompaniment to her mirth. "Since when did Tommy become a connoisseur in that line, I'd like to know? And you really like Dickie Blount?" she added, dropping suddenly from gay to grave.

"I fancy I may when I meet him."

Mrs. Hammond looked her surprise.

"But I thought——" she began.

"No, not yet. I am living in hopes.

Neely Van Dam has gone to fetch him. I'm unlike your husband. His style of humor appeals to me."

Mrs. Hammond rose.

"They're coming now," she said, after a glance into the drawing room beyond; and, as she was turning away, she flung back: "He hasn't a penny, you know."

Leila masked her irritation with a smile. What difference did it make to her whether he were prince or pauper? He had put her under obligation, and she wished to make acknowledgment. Incidentally he had afforded her amusement, which of late had become so rare an occurrence that she was anxious to cultivate the means. Edith Hammond's volunteered information suggested a suspicion, if not a fear, that a more senti-

mental motive had inspired her, and she naturally resented it.

The crown of young Van Dam's sleekly brushed head reached barely to Mr. Richard Blount's shoulder.

"I've brought you the stranger within our gates, Mrs. Merlin," he was saying. "Mr. Blount has only been in America six months, and he actually likes it. That's odd for an Englishman, isn't it?"

Leila liked the way Mr. Blount bowed. The movement had in it the grace of strength.

"Oh, really," he protested, "that's rather hard on my countrymen. I know no end of fellows at home who think a lot of it over here."

"Mr. Van Dam had in mind the great majority," Mrs. Merlin interposed, "and

I don't know that they are to be blamed. America rubs me the wrong way oftener than I should always care to admit."

"You're an apostate," shouted Neely Van Dam, with a laugh. "I'm ashamed of you. Three cheers for the stars and stripes, *e pluribus unum* and *Erin go bragh!*" and with this outburst of mixed patriotism he took himself off.

When he had gone Leila asked Blount to sit down.

"I owe you a debt of gratitude," she said, smiling. "It was most noble of you."

The Englishman stared for an instant, questioningly.

"Saving my reason," she added, her smile broadening. "In another moment I should have lost my wits. I can't tell you

what I suffered while that creature sat here and gabbled."

Over Blount's face broke the light of understanding.

"I am glad if I was of service," he said, quietly. "I thought I seemed rather rude breaking in on the conversation in that way, but my message was imperative."

She laughed aloud at this.

"The lady in the library was difficult to resuscitate, I presume."

Blount smiled a little sheepishly.

"You know?" he said, simply.

"Of course, I know. I suspected it at the time. Later I was made sure. Mr. Hammond returned and told me. There had not been a petticoat in the library for over an hour."

"Mr. Hammond!" he exclaimed, in surprise.

"To be sure. It was outrageous of you to play such a trick on your host."

"You're jesting, Mrs. Merlin."

"I was never more in earnest. Is it possible that you didn't know it was Mr. Hammond?" Leila asked in astonishment.

"I give you my word I didn't. It is singular, I admit, but I was asked here by Mrs. Hammond and somehow or other I never met her husband."

For a quarter of a second Leila was thoughtful.

"No," she said, meditatively, "it is not singular. Edith does that sort of thing. It is somewhat selfish of her, don't you think so? She doesn't always share

her friends with her lord and master."

Blount contemplated the shining toes of his pumps.

"I have put my foot in it, I fancy," he reflected.

"Yes," Leila hastened to assure him. "Mr. Hammond said as much. He left me to go in search of you." There was mischief in her expressive eyes. "How lucky for me you didn't know your danger!" she added.

He looked up suddenly.

"I trust you don't think it would have made a difference," he said, with strange earnestness.

"Wouldn't it?" she asked, a little coquettishly.

"My dear Mrs. Merlin," Blount asseverated, "I should have done precisely the

same thing had your companion been the Angel Gabriel, himself."

"It was very, very good of you," she assured him, "and I hope you will not be made to suffer too harshly for so worthy a charity."

In her tone Blount thought he detected dismissal. He rose instantly.

Fifteen minutes later Leila Merlin was being whirled down the Riverside Drive in her electric brougham.

II

IN spite of its shibboleth, the clan whose tartan Mrs. Merlin had adopted evinced an energetically prying curiosity as to her antecedents. But "indifference to past" meant with it not so much a lack of interest as a disregard of deserts. It made enquiries far and near, in places likely and unlikely, and it learned a little truth and a great deal of falsehood. That which made the most ineffaceable impression was that Mrs. Merlin was worth several millions of dollars, inherited from a California bonanza king who had married her when

he was over sixty and she a girl of nineteen. The fact that there had been considerable ill-natured gossip concerning the affair seemed hardly worth remembering under the circumstances. There was no doubt that she possessed the millions, and millions, according to its philosophy, cover a multitude of sins.

Together with Miss Lottimer, her companion, her steward Watson, and her maid, Félisie, Mrs. Merlin occupied a sumptuous suite of apartments at the St. Regis. Miss Lottimer was an English woman of forty, who would have been plain had it not been for her marvelously fresh complexion and wonderful auburn hair. Watson, who had occupied the post of *major domo* in the Merlin household in San Francisco, and who in New York

relieved Leila of a world of care and responsibility, was an Hawaiian, elderly, and distinguished-looking, with ascetic face and snow white hair. The maid was a Gascon peasant with a Paris training; and, by a singular coincidence, of the exact age of her mistress, they having been born on the same day, and to the best of their recollection at about the same hour, twenty-six years ago.

Now, on a crisp November morning, about a fortnight after the Hammond dinner, Félisie, who had brought into the Watteau daintiness of Leila's bedchamber that lady's matutinal coffee, was receiving her instructions.

"Tell Watson that I shall want a box for Daly's for Thursday night. I know it is Horse Show week and that the de-

mand must be enormous, but he must manage it in some way. Tell him, too, that the flowers Small sent yesterday were not by any means up to his usual standard. To-day I want yellow primroses for the luncheon table. And, by the way, have him get me the luncheon menu at once, and say that I will see the *maître d'hotel* at seven o'clock. Has Miss Lottimer breakfasted yet?"

"I think she has, madame."

"Say I should like to see her here, when she is at leisure. And, Félisie," she added, "I shall be dressing almost immediately.

"Oui, madame."

Into the two weeks since Leila's meeting with Blount there had crowded a multitude of incidents and a world of

conflicting emotions. Edith Hammond's attitude had at first puzzled and eventually irritated her. She was of all women most loth to believe ill of her friends, and yet she was forced to the conclusion that jealousy over Blount could alone account for Edith's marked change of manner. The discovery annoyed her all the more in that it was so utterly unwarranted. She had seen the man but twice and had spoken to him but once since the occasion of his presentation. Mrs. Hammond, she thought, should know her well enough to understand that she was not to be judged as the majority of Eve's daughters. It was a peculiarity of hers that men, as a rule, bored her. For their admiration she really cared very little. She had been surfeited with it, not only

at home but abroad, and from those of the highest position and title. She had, indeed, achieved a reputation for coldness and want of sentimentality which was in a measure not undeserved.

She was just enough to admit, on the other hand, that Mr. Blount was an exceptionally well-favored type, and in the set in which she and Mrs. Hammond moved, *sui generis*. She did not, however, regard this fact as affording sufficient grounds for her friend's amusing assumption that she had constituted herself her rival.

Had it not been for Mrs. Hammond's all too evident concern in the matter, Leila would probably have given no further thought to Richard Blount. But as it was, she fell to speculating on the at-

tractions which possessed such a disturbing fascination for her friend; and, while she could discover nothing of sufficient allurement, to her way of thinking, to warrant unfaithfulness even of thought to a husband faultlessly indulgent, she did perceive—as what woman would not?—that he came very near to filling the picture of an ideal cavalier. And there her mental contemplation came suddenly to a halt, startled, indeed, by a thought so boldly *outré* that she made haste to retreat into a more conventional field of revery.

The thought that had thus confronted her, however, was not to be so easily eluded. It recurred with a persistency that nettled as well as surprised her. The impracticability of the suggestion was

monstrous. Such, at least, was her earlier view of it; but later the objections grew less formidable. Moreover, there lay in the adoption of the idea the sweet savor of a coveted retaliation, coupled with the consummation of a long cherished, but hitherto looked upon as visionary, desire.

An incident which had much to do with Leila's change of view occurred one evening at Sherry's where she was dining with the Montgomerys, a Milwaukee family that she had met abroad the previous summer. During a lull in the conversation she had overheard a girl at the next table ask:

"Do tell me who that tall, fair man is, over there in the doorway? I've seen him about so much, and he always reminds me of an English earl." And

looking up she had seen Blount scanning the room in evident search of friends.

For the answer to the girl's question she strained her ears.

"That's a fellow they call Dickie Blount," she heard. "No one knows very much about him, except that he's an Englishman and is a familiar figure all over Europe. I have run across him in various places from Petersburg to Cairo. Two years ago I stood beside him at Ostend when he broke the bank. He's evidently a *chevalier d'industrie.* I've heard he is the illegitimate son of a marquis, but I wouldn't vouch for that."

The revelation did not surprise her; nor was she at all shocked by it. On the contrary, it was indeed a most welcome piece of information. It gave her cour-

age to approach, at least, the project which from that moment lost more than half of its impracticability.

With the following Monday came the opening of that annual apotheosis of sartorial display, the Horse Show at the Madison Square Garden. And there Leila, who occupied a conspicuous place in the box of her friends, the Hallidays —Jack Halliday was her broker—chatted for five minutes with Blount across the box railing. The conversation was made up of the veriest commonplaces, and yet it served to put her still more in confidence. She had always prided herself upon her ability to read character by physiognomic signs, and as she talked she studied the face before her. Moreover, she carefully weighed and sub-

tracted the results, and finding the balance satisfactory, she said:

"I wish you would lunch with me tomorrow, if you have nothing better to do. There's a matter I'd like to consult you about."

And Blount, admirably disguising his surprise, accepted with a nice show of appreciation.

* * *

Contemplated from a distance the task which Leila had chosen for herself presented a front beset with certain difficulties, the overcoming of which, she realized, would make some demand upon her tact. Viewing it thus she entertained no misgivings as to successful results. The obstacles merely piqued her interest and whetted her appetite for conquest. But

when she came face to face with the situation it assumed a much more frowning and forbidding aspect, and she paused, startled and amazed at her own temerity. Something more than ordinary tact would be necessary in the handling. It was a matter which called for very delicate treatment: one which would tax all her resources of artifice and finesse, and the aplomb with which she had previously regarded it threatened to fade into a disconcerting mistrust of her powers.

Blount had sat through the luncheon with an ever present sense of anticipation, for up to the moment when the coffee and liqueurs had been served and Miss Lottimer had made her excuses and discreetly withdrawn, there had been not so much as a hint from Mrs. Merlin as

to the matter on which she desired to consult him. Even now that Miss Lottimer was gone he saw no indication of a broaching of the subject. He had purposely permitted her to lead the conversation, but she had chosen a theme which must, it seemed to him, be very far removed indeed from any topic whatsoever on which his experience or advice could be of benefit. She was talking of millinery and the unconscionable prices women were required to pay for the simplest little combinations of ribbon and artificial flowers.

"And every year we are asked more," she continued, resting her forearms on the table and leaning forward in seeming rapt enthusiasm. "Seventy-five and eighty dollars for hats that used to seem

dear at fifty. How many hats can a man buy for those figures?" Her face was flushed and her eyes sparkled.

"A dozen or more in this country and twice or three times as many abroad," Blount answered, puzzled but uninterested, save in the ebullient vitality of the questioner.

"And the prices of men's hats never vary?"

"Very little, if at all."

"Yet the hat makers make more money than the milliners," she went on, in argumentative tone, as if he had disputed her. "Tommy Hammond's income is a hundred thousand a year if it is a penny; and all from hats."

"I didn't know——" Blount began, but she interrupted him.

"Oh, yes. That's his business—'Hammond's hats.' They're advertised all over the United States and Canada and he ships tons of them abroad every year, besides. He has shops in a dozen different cities. Don't you want to smoke?" she asked, suddenly. "You'll find cigarettes on that table back of you; or would you prefer a cigar?"

"A cigarette, thank you," he replied, pushing back his chair and helping himself from a répoussé gilt box that stood open to his hand. "Twenty thousand pounds a year is a very comfortable income, even if it does come from hats," he added, striking a match.

"Yes, and we don't mind the source quite so much as you do, you know. So it's honestly got, I try to be democratic

enough to overlook the channel through which it came."

Blount took a deep inhalation and paused, meditatively.

"Personally," he said, with some deliberation, "I'm something of a democrat myself, Mrs. Merlin."

The faint suggestion of a quizzical smile played about the corners of Leila's sensitive mouth.

"Ah," she demurred, twisting the stem of her empty liqueur glass between the pink ends of her thumb and forefinger, "I fancy I see how far your democracy extends. It has limitations. You would condone in others what you would not forgive in yourself."

"No, no," he protested, hastily, "there you wrong me. Were I called upon to

accept or refuse an income of twenty thousand pounds a year I should not, I assure you, raise the smallest question over its origin. My acceptance would be a foregone conclusion," and he laughed, lightly, almost boyishly at what he regarded the most unlikely of contingencies.

Leila felt encouraged. So far her diplomacy had been successful beyond her anticipation, but she was yet very far from her goal. She had simply made a good start and the course still lay rugged and untried before her.

If before to-day she had harbored any lingering doubts as to the expediency of her project the last hour had dispelled them. Throughout the luncheon she had studied her guest with microscopic cir-

cumspection and the result had been more than corroborative of her deductions of the evening before. In appearance, manner, conversation, and viewpoint, Richard Blount was a gentleman. Of this there was no gainsaying, and for the object she had in mind, it was a primary requisite. But she found in him more than fine breeding. She discovered undeniable evidences of a nice sense of honor, an almost naïve respect for virtue, and a broad and abundant charity. That his reputation in certain quarters was at variance with her conclusions did not disturb her. The world's judgment she had found was usually at fault. It had been so in her own case, and that was but one instance of many that had come under her observation.

She leaned back in her high, tapestried, Venetian chair, her jeweled hands resting on its arms, and smiled, partly in sympathy with her laughing companion and partly in self-gratulation; while Blount, in quick survey of the rich and artistic luxury of the dining room in which they sat, involuntarily made comparisons with his own somewhat shabby bachelor quarters off the Avenue in the neighborhood of Washington Square.

"I'm glad to hear you say that," she continued, with an intonation more intimate than she had yet permitted herself, "because it assures me of a sympathetic hearing, at least, of a case I want to put before you—the case I asked you here to talk over."

"Oh, yes," he put in, with unfeigned interest, "I had almost forgotten."

She was nervously agitated, now that she had at length begun the running, but she revealed nothing of her agitation to her hearer. That he might not detect the smallest sign she forced herself to speak quite slowly, with what seemed to him impressive deliberation.

"It is the case of a woman who is asking a man to marry her. I dare say that sounds odd enough to you at the outstart, but the oddity of it will impress you more as I go on. The woman is not in the least in love with the man and the man is certainly not in love with the woman. But the woman's position is somewhat peculiar. She is a widow, young, rich, and according to common re-

port fair. She is passionately fond of travel, and experience has taught her that it is impossible to travel with any degree of satisfaction—at least beyond the beaten paths—without a protector. Couriers, she has found, are not even a poor substitute. Being what she is, you can well understand the annoyance she is forced to suffer from the men she encounters in her peregrinations. Against the Lothario and the fortune hunter the courier is a poor foil, you know, and so what should be her chief pleasure, becomes a vexatious trial."

She paused an instant, and bent forward again. She was very pale now, from nervous strain, and she was conscious that her hands were ice cold.

"If I may be allowed to ask a ques-

tion," Blount interjected, "why is it necessary for a woman such as you describe to ask a man to marry her? I should fancy she would have only to pick and choose among her offers."

Leila smiled a little patronizingly.

"That is a very natural supposition," she replied, "but the woman is, as you may infer, something of a *rara avis*. She really does not care for marriage, save for this one reason, and when she weds it will be only upon certain conditions—conditions that none of her suitors would consent to, even if she were disposed to give them the chance."

"Conditions?" Blount echoed, interrogatively.

"She is asking the man to marry her, but he is to become her husband simply

in name, and the marriage may be terminated at the end of a year, at the option of either, he permitting her to divorce him."

The Englishman burst into ringing laughter.

"My dear Mrs. Merlin," he cried, "you really must pardon me, but that is preposterous. What man do you suppose would consider for a single second such an extravagantly radical proposition?"

The laughter startled her, but she rallied her forces, instantly.

"The man," she answered, very calmly, and yet with an unconscious dramaticism, "whose acceptance of an income of a hundred thousand dollars—twenty thousand pounds—a year, might be taken as a foregone conclusion."

He sat for a moment in dumb amazement, motionless, staring at her, while the realization smote him, gripped and held him, that the man and the woman in the case she had cited were himself and herself; and she, assured by his expression and attitude that her words had conveyed the impression she desired, waited, tense, eager, breathless, for him to speak.

When he did so it was with the same easy self possession, the same nonchalant indulgence that had characterized his reception of the narration from the beginning.

"It is a mere matter of exchange, then," he said, reaching for a fresh cigarette; "the man undertakes to act as traveling companion, courier or what you will, wearing meanwhile, for good and

sufficient reasons, the disguise of husband; and in return for his service he is to have paid to him by the woman sundry thousands of dollars in the current coin of the realm. This is indeed the ideal form of the hitherto underrated *mariage de convenance.*"

He paused an instant to light his cigarette, and Leila drew in her breath sharply. It had been idle of her to expect him to make admission of his knowledge. It was not reasonable to look to him for any smoothing of the way; not, at all events, until she had committed herself more clearly, more unmistakably. She plucked a yellow primrose from the silver vase on the table before her, and began pulling it to pieces.

"I doubt, however, that it could be

found in its perfection in any country other than America," he went on, with rather irritating composure, "for the reason that here alone do the divorce statutes make such a plan feasible."

"You do think it feasible, then?" she asked, quickly, with renewed animation.

"Oh, quite," he assured her, "provided, of course, a man can be found to accept the proposal; and that should not be difficult, either. There are all sorts floating about, and many a poor devil would jump at the chance. It is not easy, though, to imagine a gentleman doing it."

"Why not?"

She fairly flung the question at him, and already she had mentally formulated his answer. He would say: "Because gentlemen do not barter their names and

services in such fashion; because gentlemen rebel at conditions; because gentlemen prefer to be free to woo where their fancies dictate." But her intuition played her false. He leaned forward and dropping his cigarette into his saucer he reached out his hand to where her own lay upon the shining damask of the table's covering.

"You know already," he said, his voice low and caressing. It was as though he spoke to a child. "I do not have to tell you. It is a thing to be felt rather than expressed in words."

She caught a look in his eyes that was new to her—a look at once pitying and indulgent; and when he smiled there was no longer any hint of the cynicism she had a little while before detected in his

laugh. She felt that a veil had been lifted between them, and that she now saw the real Richard Blount for the first time. But with this revelation came also a sense of her own soul nakedness, and she was filled with shame. The enormity of the plan she had conceived and labored to bring forth was evidenced in the reception it had received at his hands. She turned away her face, conscious that tears threatened to overflow her lids, and that her lip was trembling.

He had possessed himself of her finger tips and held them lightly in his strong, virile-looking hand as he went on speaking.

"After all, my dear Mrs. Merlin," he was saying, "it is best that we be frank with each other. I quite appreciate that

what you have told me concerns yourself, and I am very much flattered to believe that you asked me here to-day, not so much to consult me as to the feasibility of such an arrangement as to make to me the proposal you have outlined."

She drew her hand away, hastily, and pressed a filmy bit of lace to her eyes. She wished to speak but she dared not trust her voice.

"I think I understand your feelings, thoroughly. I have seen women traveling abroad, dogged and harassed in the way you describe, and I have often wondered how they managed to extract enough pleasure from strange countries and new scenes to compensate them for the annoyances they were forced to endure. Then, too, the unattached feminine

tourist is debarred by the conventions from scores of places and diversions that are necessary to a correct impression of the life and customs of the peoples visited."

Leila nodded her approval, and Blount went on:

"I understand, too, that being a rich woman, accustomed to get whatever you want by paying for it, it should have occurred to you that this luxury you so much desire must be likewise purchasable. That was not unnatural; but you apparently failed to take one thing into consideration. The character of man to fill your want satisfactorily was precisely the character of man who could not be bought, no matter how tempting your offer."

This, then, was his ultimatum. For a moment hope had risen that he would, after all, consider the plan, but it was born simply by his effort to make less embarrassing to her his refusal.

"Please say no more about it, Mr. Blount," she pleaded, rising suddenly, "I see now it was the wildest sort of a mad fancy. You are quite right. Such an arrangement is utterly impossible."

He rose, too, and, though he again heard dismissal in her tone, he followed her as she crossed to a window and stood looking down on the panorama of the Avenue.

"Under ordinary circumstances," he went on in spite of her rebuke, "such an arrangement would be, as you say, utterly impossible."

The words, spoken over her shoulder, were as a dash of cold water to her fainting hopes. Her heart bounded in her bosom; a flush mounted to her pallid cheeks; but she stood quite impassive, her fingers toying with the star sapphires of her lorgnette chain.

"But in this case," he continued, after a barely perceptible pause, "the circumstances are not ordinary. I do not know, of course, why you should have chosen me as the party of the second part; but I can hazard a conjecture that it was not until you had heard certain rumors concerning me."

She turned sharply, facing him, with denial in her eyes.

"I heard nothing ill of you," she protested.

"You heard I was hard pressed for money, possibly?"

"No;" she answered, candidly, "not that exactly. But I heard you were not what we call 'well off.'"

"You didn't hear that I was an adventurer, a scapegrace, a fellow who lives by his wits?" She hesitated, and not waiting for an answer he went on, smiling a little grimly. "They say all that about me and a great deal more; and the worst of it is a large part of it is true. So, you see, such being the case, it was not at all unreasonable for you to expect me to accept your offer. What floors me, though, is to understand why, having heard these things—for I'm sure you have heard some—you dare to run the risk of making such an arrangement.

What guarantee will you have that I shall not break every condition of the contract?"

She raised her eyes to his as she replied gravely:

"That is not the question. All I wish to know is, will you, understanding the conditions, accept?"

The picture they made as they stood there, framed by the high, plate-glazed window with its deep green satin and rich lace curtains, was worthy of a less sordidly unromantic compact—the beautiful woman, tall, shapely, and harmoniously gowned, and the well-favored man, taller by several inches, broad-shouldered, reflecting lithe muscularity beneath his faultlessly-cut morning clothes.

He reached out his hand, and Leila,

still uncertain, hoping yet fearing, a little startled even, now that the crisis had been reached, met his grasp half-way.

"Understanding the conditions," he said, simply, "I accept."

III

THE advent of the new year found Mr. and Mrs. Richard Blount ensconced in a picturesquely situated villa at Verezzo on the Italian Riviera. They had gone abroad immediately after their marriage, which had followed so precipitately upon their novel and secret engagement as to afford a subject not only for a veritable tornado of excited and widely conjectural gossip among their friends, but for many columns of inaccurate and not wholly inoffensive matter in the sensational newspapers. The wedding had been of the

quietest kind, the ceremony performed by one of the judges of the City Court—an acquaintance of Blount's—in the drawing room of the bride's St. Regis apartment, with Miss Lottimer and Neely Van Dam as witnesses. Of its impending, or indeed of its celebration, Leila's world was given no hint until the formal paid notice appeared in the *Herald* on the following day, by which time the two principal figures in the event were promenading the deck of the *Kronprinz Wilhelm* as she steamed eastward somewhere off the Newfoundland banks, and congratulating themselves on the dexterously artful way in which they had avoided the unpleasantness of ambiguous congratulations.

For the better part of the ensuing

week Mrs. Hammond had railed to the satin-tufted walls of her boudoir at the treachery of her sex in general and of Leila Merlin in particular, while Mr. Hammond had inveighed to whosoever would listen against the "damned cheek" of penniless, ne'er-do-well Englishmen, in carrying off the pick of the American matrimonial market. And as the attitude of this representative couple formed a fairly average example of the way in which the affair was regarded, it may be inferred that the congratulations would have been even more ironical than ambiguous. But the two persons who had provoked the storm of obloquy were, if not unmindful of, certainly indifferent to the opinions of their detractors. The week to them had been rife with experi-

ence, as, not without some doubt and misgiving on both sides, they had devoted its days to the business of becoming acquainted with their new and unique relationship.

Before they were out of the North River, while the sky-scraping office buildings of New York's down-town still towered on their left and the railroad train sheds of the great trunk lines cut scallops in the horizon on their right, Leila had been first startled and then puzzled by a hurried apology from her husband, followed by his hasty disappearance from the deck through a conveniently adjacent doorway. When, an hour having passed without seeing his return, she had gone in search of him and found him in the *salon* of their suite, calmly reading one of the

many books with which they had provided themselves, her intuition gave her the explanation which he, either from embarrassment or mere disinclination, failed to offer. She was quite sure that he had caught a glimpse of some one on board whom he desired to avoid. Her first impulse was to ask him bluntly if this were not the fact, but on second thought she decided not only to ignore the singularity of his action, but to aid him, if possible, in escaping an encounter that would, she presumed, be at best distasteful. To this end she had suggested that they have their luncheon served in the *salon,* a proposition which Blount had seconded with evident relief.

The incident, though she strove to make the best of it, distressed her. She

saw in it the forerunner of endless similar evasions. For the first time since she had conceived and then plunged so recklessly into this strange alliance, she began to appreciate the possibilities which it might involve. Before her rose the grim spectres of crimes committed—she dreamed of avenging hands reaching out for the man whose name she had taken,—and she dreaded lest her too lightly considered action might be the means of involving her in a maze of wretched subterfuges and distressing masquerades.

This, at least, had been her state of mind on the first day out; but with the following morning had come a revulsion. Blount had recovered his customary self-possession. He no longer found it necessary to keep to his cabin, and Leila con-

cluded that, after all, she must have been mistaken in her attempted solution of yesterday's problem. Nor did any notion that her intuition had not played her false recur to her until weeks after when at the Villa Spicca, at Verezzo, she was honored by a visit from Prince Valori, of Florence, whom she had first met two years before in Switzerland.

Meanwhile she and her husband had gradually settled into a pleasant good comradeship that seemed eminently satisfying to each. The Villa Spicca had been taken for them by Watson, who, preceding them abroad by two days, had gone direct to Genoa, and had been so fortunate as to find precisely what he desired on the list of a real estate agent there. When the Blounts arrived, the

whole establishment was in working order, running with the easy, perfectly adjusted precision of a piece of fine machinery.

To the somewhat inadequate furnishing of the big, square, flat-roofed stuccoed house Watson had added a touch of the necesssary here and a bit of luxury there, until an ensemble of elegant comfort was attained. He had engaged a corps of efficient servants and he had with a liberal yet discriminating prodigality stocked pantry, larder, and wine cellar. In the stables were a dozen horses while nearly as many vehicles, including a forty horse power Mercedes and a smaller runabout automobile of British manufacture, were sheltered in a great stone, olive-embowered carriage barn adjoining.

The villa, set upon the side of a hill, overlooked the Mediterranean across a vista of green-terraced gardens and gray olive groves, amid which, winding like a huge serpent, a long sinuous white road meandered away towards San Remo. Over this smooth highway and its equally well-kept estuaries Blount and Leila were in the habit of motoring to the more frequented resorts of the neighborhood: to Mentone, to Monaco and to Nice.

It was at the last named of these that Leila had encountered Prince Valori. He had come upon her, pleased and smiling, as she was stepping into her machine in front of the Hotel des Anglais, recognizing her in spite of the disfiguring meshes of her enveloping veil, and she had presented him to her husband, who,

in draped cap and hideous lunettes, was rather more effectually disguised than herself. The Prince was voluble with questions; and before the motor chugged away Leila had given him the name and location of their villa and had asked him to call on the succeeding Wednesday.

On that morning a note from Blount was brought to her on her breakfast-tray.

"Dear Leila," it ran, "so sorry; but imperative business calls me to Genoa. Pray make my excuses to the Prince. I shall return some time tomorrow."

She flung the note down with a gesture of impatience. It was very trying that Dickie should have to leave today of all days. It was to have him with her on just such occasions that she had

married him; to shield her from the insidious advances of men of the Prince Valori type. Not that she felt herself in the smallest danger, but because the assault of veiled innuendo and masked suggestion in which they indulged mortified and nauseated her. She was tempted to send a telegram asking her visitor to postpone his coming, but remembered that she was not in possession of his address. Later she half resolved to plead indisposition and decline to see him when he came, but as the day wore away, its uneventful inactivity became wearisomely oppressive, and four o'clock found her, in spite of her earlier intentions, in the hands of Félisie preparing for the Prince's coming with what was at least a very excellent counterfeit of pleasureable anticipation.

The long windows of the main drawing room of the Villa Spicca opened onto a marble-floored terrace. This had been spread with pleasant colored Oriental rugs, furnished with rattan chairs and tables, and canopied by a red and white awning. And here it was that Leila received her caller.

Slender and erect and clad in immaculate white flannels he seemed taller than his inches warranted as he came smiling, hat in hand, through one of the long windows. The snowiness of his attire accentuated contrastingly the deep olive of his chin and the blue blackness of his hair and beard.

"How good you are!" he murmured as he took her hand and bending touched it with his lips. "This is a pleasure I have

dreamed of, but never dared hope for."

In his first words of address he had harked back to the other days; bridging the two years with a single sentence, and yet without direct reference. It was this that she had most dreaded; this taking up of the past where it had been broken off. Already he had taken advantage of her husband's absence, and she chid herself for not having acted on her first impulse and refused to see him until Dickie could be at her side.

"And we," she said, ignoring the too personal significance of his greeting, and coupling her husband with herself, "regard it as an honor."

He glanced about, turned from right to left, looked over his shoulder in exaggerated mock search.

"We?" he repeated, "I do not see—your husband, he is not here?" It was more of an affirmation than a query. He seemed to know instinctively that Blount was away.

"Mr. Blount was called unexpectedly to Genoa," Leila responded, vexed still more at her visitor's self-contained assurance, "he regretted it—we both regretted it, exceedingly."

She sat down and the Prince drew a chair close to her and did likewise. He was smiling cynically.

"We both?" he repeated, and there was something it seemed to Leila almost sinister in the question.

"We both," she repeated, with increased emphasis, the color rising to her cheeks.

The Prince bent forward dangling his Panama hat between his knees.

"I had almost hoped," he said, in lowered voice, "that you had managed it, yourself——" he paused an instant, his eyes devouring her beauty; "designedly," he added.

She threw back her head, laughing lightly.

"You flatter yourself, sir," she retorted, merrily, "on the contrary, I was really much distressed over Mr. Blount's going. I wished, particularly, that he should be here when you came."

Prince Valori showed a glowing line of white teeth through the silky fringe of his black mustache.

"And now you flatter me," he commented, shrewdly turning Leila's blade

against herself, "you feared to trust yourself with me again, madame? You remembered two years ago; you remembered Montreux and the Rochers de Naye?"

He had spoken in all seriousness, but something in Leila's face warned him that he had been too bold, and to redeem the situation he laughed, rather boisterously, slapping his knee, and shaking his shoulders in an affected paroxysm of mirth.

The appearance of a footman at this juncture, wheeling a tea table, seconded the Prince's effort to clear the surcharged air, and as Leila poured the tea and the Italian rolled and lit a cigarette, the conversation ran into a less turbulent current. They spoke of the weather, unusu-

ally mild for the season; and of the play at Monte Carlo, and an unprecedented run on the red which had occurred at the Casino the week before. Eventually their talk encompassed the villa itself, and Prince Valori, who knew it well, related some anecdotes of its late owner, Count Antonio Spicca, who had been killed in a duel at Pisa, the previous year.

"A portrait of the lady still graces the walls of your *salon,* madame," the Prince concluded, "I saw it as I came in."

Leila wished him to point it out, and rising they went into the house. It proved to be a miniature which hitherto had escaped her observation. As she bent to study it, her companion glanced at some framed photographs that surmounted the piano.

"She is hardly pretty enough for a man to lose his life for," she commented, turning away from the picture.

The Prince smiled, indulgently.

"We Italians have a proverb," he said, "'A pretty woman attracts; a tactful woman holds.' It is not given to every woman to be both pretty and tactful."

Leila fancied she detected a subtle significance in his words that was not complimentary. He was still looking at the photographs. After a moment he said:

"Fancy your having this fellow's picture here!"

"Whose?" she asked, scarcely interested, her thought still with his previous remark.

"This," and he handed her a likeness of her husband.

Instantly a strange foreboding assailed her. She suffered a sudden faintness; objects swam before her eyes and the floor seemed sliding from beneath her feet. But with an effort she commanded herself—holding the photograph to one side, ostensibly to obtain a better light, but really to hide her face from her visitor.

"Why should I not have it?"

She was conscious of what seemed to her an interminable pause broken by a voice strangely unlike yet still her own, propounding a question dictated by her curiosity, yet against which all her better nature rebelled.

"Because," answered the Prince, with some feeling, "the fellow is——" and then for a shade of a second he hesitated, while myriad bees seemed to Leila to be

buzzing in her brain, as she struggled to retrieve her error and find words to stem a revelation which she foresaw must at least endanger her future peace of mind.

"I should prefer," she began; but she was too late.

"Is a thief, a blackleg and a renegade."

The arraignment fell upon her hearing in a trio of stunning blows, under which for a moment her senses reeled and her physical strength faltered. The photograph dropped from her nerveless fingers, her hand groped for support to a convenient chairback, and a frightened, haunted look came into her lowered eyes.

Prince Valori, stooping to recover the picture, missed the look and the other signs of distress as well.

"It's four or five years now since the

affair happened," he went on, all unmindful. "I remember it quite well, though, for I had met the fellow, and rather liked him. There was a lot in the society papers at the time, chiefly innuendo of course, but, plain as day to those that knew. I happened to be in London just then, and I swear one heard nothing at the clubs but the Bathurst jewel robbery. It was generally conceded that this chap," and he tapped the photograph with the brim of the hat which he held in his other hand, "was the thief. He was very deep in debt and he needed the money to save himself. He had had an *affaire* with Lady Bathurst—every one knew that—and when the opportunity offered he decamped with a parure of diamonds and a few other of the Bathurst family gems.

He fancied that she would never dare make her loss public; but she did, and the Honorable George Heatherly, though he was never openly accused, suffered the consequences. He dropped out of sight completely for a while, but I believe he has been seen floating about the Continental resorts again in the last year or so, under some name or other that I don't just now remember. I'm rather curious to know where you ran across him, Mrs. Merl—pardon me!—Mrs. Blount."

Leila had sunk onto the chair at the beginning of the narration, and had sat, transfixed and dumb, while every syllable cut cruel gashes in her self-respect; but as he stumbled over her name, she raised sudden, keen eyes, seeking to detect by some sign of facial expression

whether in pronouncing it he had come unexpectedly upon her secret. What she saw, however, gave her no hint. The face of the Prince was cryptic in its immobility.

"Ran across him?" she repeated, as though a little dazed. "Oh, yes, how stupid of me! I fear I was rude enough to lose the thread of your story, Prince. To tell the truth, I have had a perfectly frightful headache all the afternoon. You were speaking of the photograph? Yes, I remember; but the photograph is not mine. It is my husband's."

She stood up and held out her hand.

"And I may come again?" he pleaded as he bent over her extended fingers.

"Whenever it pleases you," she answered, with forced cordiality.

But when, near the end of the following week, Prince Valori again alighted from his motor in front of the Villa Spicca it was to meet a gray and wizened Ligurian peasant, who was acting as caretaker. The signor and signora had been gone for several days, he said, and the villa was once more for rent.

IV

BLOUNT, returning dusty and soot-stained, from Genoa on the afternoon succeeding the Prince's initial call, found Leila awaiting him at the San Remo station with the mail phaeton and a pair of high-stepping cobs. The journey had seemed to him particularly wearisome and dirty with its many stops and its never ending succession of tunnels, and the spectacle of his wife, fresh and smart in a close fitting tailor gown of pale gray with toque of the same shade, was as refreshing as it was unexpected. He had wired her to

have him met, but he had scarcely hoped that she would come herself, and as he climbed up beside her his handsome face reflected his pleasure through its grime.

"It was awfully good of you to drive down," he said, tucking in the robe at his side, while the horses, cavorting spiritedly on being released from the groom's hold, made ready to plunge away when Leila should give them their heads. "I've had a beastly dull time of it, and the trip both ways was infernal."

"I haven't had an overjoyous time, myself," she responded, as she loosened the reins a trifle and the cobs started. "Prince Valori came yesterday and bored me for an hour, and I have been half-way ill ever since."

The statement made lightly was no ex-

aggeration of the fact. The preceding twenty-four hours had been for her a period of acute mental disturbance: a magnified repetition of her experience on board the *Kronprinz Wilhelm,* wherein the folly of her experiment took on proportions that awed and abashed her. For the gratification of a whim she had, it seemed to her, like Frankenstein created a monster which would demand more or less painful retribution from its creator.

That Richard Blount and George Heatherly were one and the same it never occurred to her to doubt. The evidence lay not only in a certain conjunction of circumstances between Valori's narrative and the story she had heard that night at Sherry's, but even more in the unpremeditated and to her unexplained trip of

Blount to Genoa on the day that the Prince was expected to call. It was, nevertheless, difficult for her to reconcile the tale she had heard with the character of the man as she had first read it, and as subsequent observation had tended to ground more firmly among her convictions. Viewed from this standpoint—and during the long evening, the longer, sleepless night and the but little less lengthy day, she had focussed the situation from all sides and in every possible light—the affair seemed less portentous. But Leila knew enough of the world—indeed none knew it better—to understand that appearances are often more far reaching and disastrous than established fact, and that while her husband might be entirely innocent, his innocence would

serve in no way to foil embarrassment, so long as the impression remained abroad that he was guilty.

She was, in a sense, thoroughly unconventional—otherwise she would never have considered, much less have adopted, her present equivocal relationship—yet there were certain principles, certain established tenets, to which she held with an almost fanatical devotion; and among these was the placing of honor at the apex of the virtues. She had been accustomed to discount, if not to ignore, public opinion in most matters, and especially in those which directly concerned herself, believing that her obligations were to her own conscience and extended no further. And it was in this spirit that she had entered into her marriage. Her faith in the

man she had chosen to serve her as protector and companion was such that she felt she would be able to disregard the unsavoriness of the gossip that was certain to reach her concerning him. The indefinite general charge that he was a *chevalier d'industrie* had been rather welcome than otherwise. In its broadest meaning, she believed it a calumny. And the rumored illegitimacy of his birth had awakened her sympathy, strengthening rather than weakening her embryotic fancy. But to be recognized as the wife of one even reputedly so lost to all sense of honor as to rob the woman who had for love of him broken her vows of marital loyalty was quite another and stupendously greater matter.

Yet, confident of his innocence, she felt

for him no blame. In acceding to her more than unusual proposition he had been careful to leave her under no possible misapprehension. He had foreseen, evidently, precisely what had already happened and what was liable to happen again; happen, for all he or she knew in even more forbidding guise. And as she regarded this phase of the situation, her course became more clearly defined.

She saw that their coming to the Riviera had been a mistake. Of all places, London probably alone excepted, it was the most likely locality for encountering the embarrassment which she now realized it should have been her first thought to avoid. And yet it had been that she might travel wherever her fancy dictated that had induced her to adopt her present

relationship. In this respect, at least, she conceded, with the first gleam of amusement to lighten the grim practicality of her meditation, her marriage had been a failure.

And then she fell to considering the advantages and disadvantages of other seasonable resorts, her inclination tinctured always now by the one paramount consideration. She had been so engaged when Blount's telegram arrived, and suddenly conscious of a new and strange emotion, born of her prolonged and varied reflections—a tenderness almost maternal—she had resolved that she would herself drive down to San Remo for the returning traveler.

Now, as they drove homeward together, propinquity added still another

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spur to her sympathy, and, as she caught sight of the dust rings beneath his eyes, giving his face a strangely haggard and somewhat melancholy aspect, it occurred to her that he had gone on this journey, not so much to spare himself the annoyance of recognition by Prince Valori, as to save her the embarrassment which might possibly ensue. What had happened in his absence it was not reasonable to imagine he could have foreseen. She was quite sure that the name of Blount meant nothing to the Prince when she had introduced her husband that day at Nice, and to have recognized him, masked as he was, she knew was impossible. And Dickie, as keenly observant as herself, was, she felt satisfied, equally well aware of these facts. He had gone away, there-

fore, confident that by so doing he would be able to postpone at least, if not avert altogether, the grafting of a suspicion which might eventually sprout and blossom into noxious flower.

It was not until they had traversed the Via Vittoria Emanuele and had cut diagonally into the Corso di Garibaldi that Leila broached the subject of leaving Verezzo.

"It's beautiful here," she said, with appreciation, "the climate at this season is ideal, and I have enjoyed motoring about the country immensely, but I really think we have exhausted it. It was my intention, you know, to stop until April—I should have liked to be here for the *fêtes* —but I find I'm growing restless, and so I think we had better move on. I'm sorry

for you to miss the pigeon shooting at Monte Carlo; you were rather counting on that, weren't you?"

"Oh, pray don't speak of it," Blount protested, readily falling into her mood, "I shan't mind in the least. Have you decided in which direction we shall wing our flight?"

"No, I haven't," she returned, touching the off horse with the tip of her whip lash, "I have been considering one place after another, this whole blessed afternoon, but I can't come to any definite conclusion and so I want your help."

She gave him a smiling side glance, and he was conscious of a sudden and unwonted quickening of his pulses.

"I have been thinking of Spain," she added. "I even had Persia in mind

for a time, and Africa and the desert."

"Spain," Blount rejoined, "is picturesque enough, but it's rather squalid and you would have to take your own cook or die of indigestion brought on by hot food in a hot climate. Persia is picturesque, too, and interesting, but the journey is long and one that I cannot recommend. Africa would be my choice, though I fear the desert might be rather trying. By the way, have you ever been to Tangier?"

"No," she cried, impulsively, "never. Let us go to Tangier. It is in Morocco, isn't it? It will be new, absolutely new. And how do we get there?"

"There are boats, I believe, from Marseilles, sailing every other week and——"

"Every other week!" she exclaimed,

impatiently, "and I suppose one sailed yesterday or will tomorrow! No, no, we cannot wait. Don't you suppose Watson could charter a steam yacht at Nice or Cannes?"

"I dare say."

"And then we can take in no end of places, *en route,*" she went on planning with youthful eagerness. "We can—Do we go anywhere near Gibraltar? I admit my geography is something frightful."

Blount seemed to hesitate, she thought, before answering, and when he spoke the reason appeared clear.

"On the contrary," he rejoined, "your geography appears excellent. Tangier and Gibraltar are opposite neighbors. They are just across the strait from each other."

Recognizing what she took for a witticism, her laughter rippled out in a fountain of uncontrolled merriment.

"Dickie," she cried, "I knew it would come sooner or later. You Englishmen simply can't help it, can you? It's in the blood."

"In the blood?" he repeated, puzzled, and with a tinge of annoyance at her raillery.

"You don't want me to believe you didn't mean it for a pun?" she asked, a little sobered by his tone.

"I give you my word, I didn't," he answered, gravely. "To tell the truth my thoughts at the moment had taken rather a serious turn."

It was not until several days later that Leila found a satisfactory explanation of

this confessed seriousness of reflection. Even the fact that Gibraltar was a crown colony of Great Britain had never occurred to her until, glancing over a copy of an illustrated London newspaper, the name caught her eye and held it. Stopping to read she learned that Lieutenant-Colonel Lord Heatherly and his regiment had been recently transferred to Gibraltar after four years at Aldershot.

"Lieutenant-Colonel Lord Heatherly," she repeated to herself, and turning the page she encountered a portrait of a British officer in uniform—a British officer, older possibly by several years than Richard Blount, but bearing a resemblance so marked that it startled her.

V

THE eight-hundred-ton yacht, *Musidora,* dainty and white as a bride, her brasses gleaming in the morning sunshine, floated idly at anchor on the blue waters of Malaga harbor, and beneath the wide awning of her after-deck, seated in a comfortably-cushioned cane chair, Mr. Richard Blount quite alone and in deeply ruminative mood, smoked an after-breakfast cigar.

There was really no reason why he should not have accompanied Leila and her friends—she had unexpectedly run across the Montgomerys from Milwau-

kee, here at Malaga, and they were off today to La Concepcion, the wonderfully beautiful gardens of the Marquis de Casa Loring—but he had made some idle excuse, and she had yielded cheerily, as she always did, to his expressed wishes.

The Montgomerys, who were a pleasant enough couple themselves, included in their party a sister of Mr. Montgomery, a massively built young woman with disproportionately small dark eyes and an equally disproportionately small piping voice, and a brother of Mrs. Montgomery, a massively built young man with a shock of sandy hair, who had played full-back on a Western college football team. Both of these young persons were particularly obnoxious to Blount, and the thought of passing an entire day with

them had been sufficient to cause him to conjure up a pretext for stopping behind.

But now he was inclined to chide himself for so doing. It was not according to a strict interpretation of his contract. He had been engaged as a companion, adviser and bodyguard—a sort of high grade courier—and he was being extravagantly paid for his services. Yes, that was the plain, unvarnished truth of the matter; and he had no more right to ask to be excused from going to La Concepcion, because some of the party were uncongenial, than the captain of the yacht would have to refuse to compute the latitude and longitude on Sunday, because of religious scruples against violation of the fourth commandment.

There were times, though, he mused,

when to run away was really in the line of his duty. He recalled his miserable trip to Genoa, and with its recalling there recurred to him the suspicion that Leila had not been so blind to his motive as she wished him to believe. The thought when it first came had aroused his admiration not only for her discernment, but for her tact and self-restraint. It would have been natural for her to let him see that she understood, even if she did not openly boast of her understanding. Instead of which she had striven to hide all evidence of it, and had actually succeeded; for, after all, his supposition had for basis nothing more tangible than intuition. Nevertheless he felt reasonably assured that their sudden desertion of the Riviera and their departure on the

cruise in which they were now engaged were provoked solely by Leila's fancy that he had reasons for avoiding a meeting with Prince Valori. And if so, it was but another instance of her unfailing consideration for him.

It was, indeed, quite in line with her action on the *Kronprinz Wilhelm* when he deserted her and rushed to his stateroom before they were well away from the dock. He would never forget how she had herself suggested that they have their meals served in their own cabin. And in return for these exhibitions of unselfish and sympathetic amiability he was shirking his duty.

Nor was his self-reproach the less soothing because in the fortnight of their dawdling cruise down the French and

Spanish coasts he had been untiring in his somewhat formal attentions, and always conscientiously mindful of his rather weirdly anomalous position. It was not the easiest thing in the world, he had found, to play husband to a beautiful and charming woman on board a yacht, with you and she the only passengers, and the days long and sunny and the evenings bright under the southern constellations. But he had been more than circumspect. He had accepted Mrs. Merlin's proposition knowing the conditions, and he could not forget that the very object for which he was employed was to guard her against the advances of just such men as himself.

There had been times in his life, especially in the past few years, when the voice of conscience commanded his scant

obedience, but in the present instance his honor was keenly alive, stimulated and kept in fettle not only by the reliant trust of the woman who had chosen him, in spite of scandal and obloquy, for a post so delicately trying, but by her repeated evidences of generous toleration.

Six bells were striking forward, and he got up and tossed the end of his cigar over the rail, oppressed by a sense of loneliness oddly new to him. He had fancied that he would rather enjoy a day to himself aboard the yacht; imagining that he would find in it a respite from the restraint which had grown a little onerous of late, and so he had begged off from the day's excursion, and, while Leila had remained with her friends at the Hotel de Rome over night in order that

she might be on hand for an early start in the morning, he had returned to the *Musidora,* resolved to put in this day alone with his thoughts. But already his meditations had filled him with unrest. He missed the companionship which had grown into a habit; and deprived of the harmonious charm of her presence, the dulcet contralto of her voice, and the melodious ripple of her laughter, the day seemed strangely lacking in all the essentials of the peace he craved.

He called a steward and ordered the launch to take him ashore, determined to find distraction even at the cost of a visit to one or another of Malaga's sugar or cotton mills, or perhaps an inspection of the paintings in the vast old Cathedral. Arrived at the quay, however, he found

a more inviting prospect in a stroll through the residential portion of the town, and so turned his steps toward the Alameda, halting occasionally to exercise his meagre Spanish upon a picturesque native. From one of these he learned that a bull fight was to take place that afternoon at the *Plaza de Toros* which lies in the direction of the suburban Caleta, and he hailed the information with delight, seeing in the excitement of the spectacle not only a likely means of escape from his *ennui* but a promising antidote for his restlessness.

He and Leila had gone together to the bull ring in Barcelona, when the yacht put in there over Sunday, and he recalled now with a flush of something akin to sentiment her nervous apprehension dur-

ing the preliminary stages of the performance, accompanied by an occasional involuntary clutching at his arm when a daring *picador* agilely escaped by a hair's breadth the sharp horns of the maddened bull; and how this stage of emotion was gradually superseded by a throbbing excitement until, at the end, when the great beast lay prostrate and the *matador* stood proudly bowing his acknowledgement of the clamorous plaudits of his audience, she had fairly hugged that same arm in her enthusiasm, crying: "Oh, wasn't it glorious!"

He had come by now in the course of his walk to the Plaza de Riego, and was standing before the Torrijos monument, when a voice behind him, speaking his name, caused him to turn sharply to face

a man nearly as tall as himself and pounds heavier.

"Dickie Blount, by gad, of all men in the world! And in Malaga of all places!"

It was Charley Manderson, as puffy and red of face and broad of neck as when he saw him last leaning against the Waldorf bar and complaining, in loud voice and still louder language, that the wine served him was too cold by at least five degrees; Charley Manderson, the importer of wines, liqueurs and cordials, who knew every hotel man worth knowing in the United States, and a good many other people not worth knowing.

Blount's joy at the meeting was not by any means commensurate with Manderson's surprise, and his manner, in spite of a forced friendliness of greeting,

[illegible] me [illegible] [illegible] [illegible]

a little [illegible] music hall sought, with a table engaged at Reuter's for supper after. But the next best thing to seeing Ronnie and the rest of the gang is seeing you, Dickie, my boy. How in God's name, though, did you get here?" he questioned, having made his own position clear.

"I came by sea," Rhona answered, tersely.

"By sea? Good heavens, how? There's no transatlantic line that drops you here, is there?"

"No, I don't believe there is. I'm on my way to Morocco just now; came around from Nice, by yacht."

"Oh!" exclaimed Manderson, a little taken aback, "yachting, eh? How long since you left New York?"

"About two months."

"I've been away since the end of last August. Jumped across as soon as the racing ended at Saratoga, and I'm dead homesick for Broadway. Have a cigar?" he asked, drawing two long black Havanas from a waistcoat pocket. "They're the best I could find in Paris, but they don't smoke like those we get at home."

Blount declined on the pretext that he preferred a cigarette and helped himself from his own case.

The wine shop into which they presently turned was located almost directly across the *calle* from the Hotel de Rome. When they were seated with a bottle of native wine between them, Manderson, with a twist of his fat thumb in the direction of the hotel, said:

"I'm stopping over there, but they haven't a thing in the place fit to drink."

"No?" Dickie queried. "I haven't sampled their drinkables."

"Haven't, eh? Well, you needn't want to. I'd like to have an order to fit 'em out in good shape. After all, America's the place to get what you want when it comes to wettin' your whistle, as you yachtsmen say. But if they haven't got good things to drink there, they certainly have got something that's good to look at."

Blount, who was becoming more and more bored, scarcely heard now what his companion said. His thoughts had run off again to La Concepcion, and he was wondering what fashion of man the Marquis de Casa Loring might happen to be.

"But that's imported from us," Manderson rattled on, as he refilled his glass, "and unless I'm very much mistaken I know just where it came from."

"Do, eh?" He was thinking now of young "Beef" Harris, and of how he had caught him the evening before at dinner gazing at Leila with a mixture of awe and admiration in his red brown eyes.

"I just got a glimpse last night, but that was enough to keep me awake for hours. You can guess what it was, can't you?"

"Haven't the faintest notion," Blount said aloud, while to himself he was saying: "After all, the lad isn't to be blamed, I suppose. She certainly did look ravishing enough to turn any fellow's head."

"A woman. Oh, yes, a woman, but the damnedest prettiest creature that ever came out of California. She'd make your mouth water to look at her, Dickie, old man."

The last expression fitting in with his thoughts brought Blount back to his surroundings with something of a jolt.

"Oh, ah, yes," he stammered, "make your mouth water to look at her, eh?" He fancied Manderson was dilating upon one or another of the houris of the chorus, for which class of femininity he was known to possess a strong and abiding predilection.

"And her history to me is an open book," the speaker continued, leaning his bulky proportions back until the chair creaked; "yes, sir, she was the ward of

a mining king out there in El Dorado County, and when I say ward I'm putting it very mild indeed. Everybody in Placerville knew what she was. But the old man sent her to school in 'Frisco, and then he sent her abroad to finish up, and finally, on his death-bed, he married her and left her every penny of his millions."

"Millions!" exclaimed Blount, for he had been listening now, and had marked the strange similarity between the history of this footlight divinity, as he supposed, and the gossip he had heard once before, weeks prior to his marriage, about Leila.

"Millions," Manderson repeated, "ten at least; some say twenty. Well, what did she do then? Rushed back here to Europe and cut the widest kind of a

swath all over the place. Why, there wasn't a swagger fast joint in Paris that didn't know her as well as any of the big Parisian *demi-mondes.* It was Maxime's and the Rat Mort every night for hers. And the men she had fluttering around her! All sorts from jockeys to princes. She ran off to Switzerland one time, I remember, with an Italian prince named Valori, and——"

Dickie's face had turned first white and then crimson. At the name Valori he brought his fist down on the table with a crash that shook the bottle and overturned the glasses.

"In God's name," he cried, fiercely, "about whom are you talking?"

Manderson, bewildered by his companion's sudden vehemence, sat up, staring.

"About her," he answered, lamely, "about her I saw here last night at the hotel. Mrs. Mer——"

Blount, springing up suddenly, shot out his hand across the narrow table and clutched the fellow by the throat, choking the name half born.

"You liar!" he hissed, "you damned, low-lived liar!"

More amazed than angry Manderson squirmed out of his grasp and struggled to his feet, as his chair fell back under him.

"By God!" he shouted, his spleen rising, now that he was free, "you'll pay for this! Of all the outrageous—Why in blazes didn't you tell me that you were interested? I'd——"

"I am her husband," Dickie interrupt-

"You liar! You low-lived liar!"

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ed, quietly, as he wiped his hands on his handkerchief, "and if you ever dare to repeat a thousandth part of what you have said to me, I'll slit your lying tongue from tip to root."

The altercation, though brief, had been replete with spirited action and loud words, and the wine shop, aroused from its midday lethargy, was in a ferment. The noise had penetrated to the street, too, and a group had gathered about the door. Blount met the remonstrance of the proprietor with a gold piece worth twenty-five pesetas, and, without so much as looking back at Manderson, who, with purple visage, was endeavoring to adjust his disarranged collar, walked out of the shop; and, hailing a fiacre, directed the driver to drive him to the Plaza de Toros.

VI

THE Montgomerys dined that evening aboard the *Musidora*. Leila brought them back with her, and Blount, already dressed and on deck, received them as they came over the side. In recognition of the festivity Watson had had the yacht decorated with Chinese lanterns and she wore a distinctly gala-day air. While the ladies went below to remove wraps and put the finishing touches to toilets rather hastily made at the hotel—for they had been late in returning from the Marquis's gardens—the men sipped *apéritifs* on deck.

"You were wise not to go," Montgomery was saying, addressing his host, "a dusty, tiresome trip, and nothing worth seeing at the end of it." He was a little, rolypoly man with iron-gray hair,—the direct opposite of his mammoth sister,—whose collars always seemed too low and whose coats appeared too short.

"I dare say I was better entertained," Blount rejoined; "I went to the bull fight. The *matador* was very badly gored."

"Oh, did you see it?" cried young Harris, with envy in his tone, "I heard about it at the hotel. They say he will die."

"And serve him jolly well right," commented Blount; "it's a barbarously cruel and unfair sport, ragging the poor beast the way they do."

"At the same time," Montgomery put

in, smiling, "it always strikes me as amusing, the way they decorate the bull with rosettes and festoons and streamers. I say they dress their beef over here before they kill it, while we do it afterwards."

"There was lots of excitement in Malaga today," the young collegian volunteered. "That's always the way, whenever I go anywhere I'm sure to miss something. There was a row in the wine shop opposite the hotel. Two tourists had a rough and tumble bout, I heard."

Blount made an effort to ignore this interpolation.

"The bull fight," he said, striving to discourage the young American, "is picturesque, it is true, but I can hardly conceive——"

"Pardon me," Montgomery interrupted

him, a little rudely he thought. "What was that Harris was saying? Two tourists? Couldn't you learn who they were, 'Beef'? There are surely not so many in Malaga just now, but what——"

"One of them," "Beef" answered, thus encouraged, "is stopping at the hotel. I have seen him, but I don't know his name. He's an American, though, I think; and the other, the fellow who told me about it described as very tall and broad and smooth shaven, and had light hair, and he thought he was an Englishman." He glanced questioningly at Blount as he spoke, and Montgomery, recognizing the fitness of the description, also turned his gaze that way.

"It sounds a little——" he began, with a laugh.

"Like me?" Dickie queried. "Well, it does, that's true. But I can assure you that I was neither the victor nor the vanquished in such a bout as Mr. Harris describes."

In such wise did Mr. Richard Blount fancy, with a deft manipulation of words, he had successfully evaded suspicion and closed the incident; whereas he had, simply by his refusal to admit his part in the affair, corroborated a suspicion which in its passage from lip to lip became ere it reached Leila, not only a fact but a fact clad in some circumstance of detail. For Harris at his first opportunity confided to his brother-in-law that his informant was an American who had been in the wine shop at the time and had overheard a portion at least of the conversation; cer-

tainly sufficient to warrant him in the presumption that the fat and florid man had said something regarding the other man's wife which the other man had rather strenuously resented. And the fixing of Blount's identity was too clear to be gainsaid. Harris's friend had recognized him as the gentleman who had dined with Harris's party the night before at the hotel. Indeed Harris had been quite sure of this when he broached the subject in Blount's presence, imagining that all he need do was to suggest it, and that a more accurate and complete account of the affair would be readily forthcoming from the participant.

These statements were in turn conveyed by Montgomery to his wife, and Mrs. Montgomery, without the least em-

barrassment, repeated the whole story to Leila, veiling, but in a way that only disclosed the truth more clearly, that portion which had to do with the supposed cause of the altercation.

The opportunity for the disclosure had not come until the following day, when, in response to an invitation from Leila, given at the dinner party, and eagerly accepted, the Montgomery quartette had returned to the *Musidora* for the trip to Tangier. Mrs. Montgomery, who was a dainty, doll-like, blonde little creature, and quite as brainless as she was pretty, interlarded her tale with admiration and encomium for Leila's husband. She said it was like a bit out of some old romance —this striking a blow in defence of his lady's good name—and she was not

wholly able to disguise her chagrin when Leila, instead of rapturously coinciding with her view, treated the whole matter as if it were distasteful and not to be spoken of.

The truth was that while Leila appreciated Dickie's loyalty and gallantry to the full, she was greatly distressed over the way in which she felt sure Manderson had distorted facts in speaking of her. For she knew very well that it was Manderson. She had seen him at the same moment that he had seen her on that evening after Dickie returned to the yacht, and she had been at some pains to avoid him, knowing what manner of man he was. The story, therefore, had not surprised her; but she feared lest, in spite of his apparently very effectual re-

sentment of whatever aspersions may have been cast upon her, Dickie might believe more of them than there were facts to warrant. And she confessed to herself, not without a thrill, that it should be so, that she cared more for what he might believe than she ever remembered to have cared before for any man's belief concerning her.

"Yes," she said, when Mrs. Montgomery had concluded, "it was very noble indeed of him, of course; though I don't exactly see what else he could have done under the circumstances. But there is just one thing I must beg of you, Margaret, dear, and that is that you'll never refer to the matter in his presence. He hasn't told me of it, and I don't wish him to know that I have heard."

The conversation had taken place in the saloon, where Mrs. Montgomery had discovered Leila looking over some new music which had reached her from Paris just before sailing. But now she found the atmosphere of the cabin unbearably stuffy, and so, lacing her arm through that of her loquacious little friend, she made her way to the deck, fairly dragging her friend with her.

As they emerged they encountered Blount, marine glass in hand, descending from the bridge.

"Look!" he said, pointing away, ahead, over the starboard bow, "Gibraltar. Take the glass, Mrs. Montgomery, it brings it out quite plainly."

Margaret Montgomery raised the glass to her blue eyes, and adjusted the focus.

"But where's the sign?" she asked, disappointedly. "Doesn't it show from this distance?"

"The sign!" Dickie and Leila echoed the word in chorus.

"Certainly. You don't mean to say you two have never seen those pictures of the rock of Gibraltar in the magazines, with the life insurance advertisement painted on it?"

Her listeners greeted this with a roar of laughter.

"Oh, that's been taken down," Leila said, winking at her husband.

"Yes," added Dickie, with a responsive twinkle in his eye, "the company found the cost too extravagant. They tried to jew down the British Government, but the King wouldn't yield a penny and so

they abolished the expense altogether."

Mrs. Montgomery looked from one to the other for a moment, and then she rejoined:

"I do believe you're chaffing."

A little later Dickie turned to his wife, with a low-voiced question:

"We're to put into Gibraltar for the night at least, I suppose?" She thought she detected a faint shade of apprehension in his tone.

"No," she answered, quietly, "we go straight on to Tangier."

"But," he began, "I'm sure Montgomery expects——"

"I'm sorry," she interrupted, before he could conclude his sentence, "but I am anxious to get to Tangier, without any delay. If Mr. Montgomery wishes to go

to Gibraltar I'll have the yacht take him over some day. As for myself, I haven't the slightest desire to see the place."

The decision puzzled Blount a great deal. He recalled distinctly how she had asked if Tangier was near Gibraltar, apparently with marked interest, and he had felt confident that she had her mind fully resolved upon an inspection of the fortress and garrison. What could have changed her plans he was unable to conjecture. The problem remained with him all of that day; and that night, when the *Musidora* was anchored off Tangier, he dreamed that Leila came to him with a copy of the *Illustrated London News* declaring that she had found his picture in it, labeled "Lieutenant Colonel Lord Heatherly," and begging him, with tears

streaming from her eyes, to tell her what it meant.

* * *

Through the turmoil of Tangier's narrow and winding principal street, with its bazaars, its tiny shops, and its coffee houses, on either side, and its variegated crowd of Moors, Spaniards, French and English residents, donkeys, camels and Arab horses, pushing and jostling for precedence in its middle, the Blounts and their guests, led by three picturesque guides, elbowed and picked their way in search of bargains in Moorish lanterns, guns, swords and other frippery for the ornamentation of the Montgomery Oriental room in far off Milwaukee.

The expedition had thus far proved successful beyond their fondest expecta-

tions, but there were still in prospect a few *objects d'art* in the shape of brass plaques of a certain design or dimension upon which the petite Margaret had set her heart, and in the hope of finding them within, she and Leila and Miss Montgomery, accompanied by one of the guides as interpreter, now crowded into one of the larger of the never large bazaars.

Blount and the other two men halted on the threshold, and thus a little way removed from the noisy rabble of the thronging thoroughfare, they stood interestedly watching its kaleidescopic procession. The moving picture was extremely diverting and the bargaining within the bazaar was accomplished all too soon for their pleasure, since it meant

once again joining in the fray for place. But for Blount, especially, the reappearance of the ladies came at a moment when he would most have preferred them absent. The passing of a heavily laden camel, forcing the pedestrians to crowd back against the walls, and even into the doors of the shops, had thrown against him, almost into his arms in fact, a somewhat large and distinctly handsome woman of the British blonde type. Leila, who was just behind him at the moment, noted at once that she was very much overdressed and she got at the same time a whiff of scent, the pungency of which at once conveyed to her understanding the creature's place in the social economy.

She was rather inclined to laugh at the way chance had deposited this burden

practically upon her husband's manly breast, but the sequel, which followed immediately, produced in her, perhaps unreasonably, a change of inclination.

"My word!" the woman exclaimed, in a voice so loud and high pitched that it rose above the clamor of the street. "My word! If it aren't old George!"

She saw the color mantle his neck, as he raised his white pith helmet, and his voice sounded so cold and hard as he said: "Yes; how do you do?" that she scarcely recognized it as his.

And then the crowd, rude and resistless—yet, O, how kindly, now!—carried the woman on, waving her red parasol and shouting back with turned head:

"I'm at the Continental! Come and see me, that's a dear."

Mrs. Montgomery tittered in spite of her husband's frown, and Miss Montgomery's expansive face grew scarlet as she looked the other way and pretended not to hear. Young Harris's gaze followed the red parasol. He meant, when opportunity offered, to ask Blount to give him a card to the lady that carried it.

Leila turned to the guide at her elbow.

"We shall not go any farther this morning, Ismaiah," she said. "Which is the nearest way to the Hotel Grand Bretagne?"

Blount did not attempt any explanation of the incident or offer any apology for it, and that it left him with any sense of irritation or annoyance was evidenced only by an increased taciturnity at luncheon. He was not talkative at best, but

on this occasion, while the rest of the group indulged in ceaseless chatter concerning their impressions of Moorish customs and methods, he maintained a persistent silence which Leila, for one, did not fail to note. And when, luncheon over, the party strolled out onto the terrace and lounged in cane chairs under the gay striped awning, he still seemed more inclined to thought than to conversation.

Leila, though more voluble, was not a whit less reflective. Between each observation, statement, question and answer, there obtruded a mental discussion. She remembered that Blount had himself suggested this visit to Tangier, and that she had marveled at the time over his not choosing Algiers, which was nearest, or

Cairo, which was more popular. And then, when she had fancied she discovered an antipathy on his part to Gibraltar, she had marveled still more that he should wish to come so near. She was asking herself now if in the episode of the morning was revealed the explanation of these seeming paradoxes. Could it be possible that he knew this woman was here, and had arranged the visit to Tangier with the sole object of seeing her? It seemed hardly likely, she thought—and certainly his tone and manner at the unexpected encounter did not leave an impression of abundant pleasure on his part—yet she could scarcely persuade herself that he had not foreseen a meeting with this person—probably in a more clandes-

tine fashion—when he suggested this port as a pleasing destination.

The suspicion piqued and fretted her. It was not, she made mental avowal, that she cared the smallest imaginable atom what *affaires* this so-called husband of hers indulged in; she repudiated the idea that her vexation was in any way attributable to jealousy—such a feeling was impossible since she was in no wise in love with the man—but she resented the fact of having been used; the more especially in that her sole object in leaving the Riviera was to afford an escape for him from what she fancied might be an embarrassing situation.

And yet she was just. With that fair-mindedness which was one of her chief virtues, she admitted that there was an-

other side to be considered. The encounter which had provoked all this train of thought was certainly not of Dickie's seeking;—even now he was morose over it, as she could see—and had it not been for that, she might in all probability have stopped here at Tangier until she was tired, and gone away without ever knowing that he had so much as an acquaintance in the city.

And if he *had* come here, designedly? Had she not enjoyed the cruise—every hour of it? Had she not seen Barcelona, and Palma, and Cartagena, and Malaga, which were all new to her? And was not Tangier itself an effective specific for those fits of *ennui* which until within a few months had been the bane of her days? No, she should not judge him too

harshly. Besides, had he not told her in the beginning that he was a reckless soldier of fortune, laying no claim to high principle? And had she not risked even worse things than this, seeing that the only recommendation she had of him was that which in her own conceit she thought she read in the dark blue depths of his big thoughtful eyes?

VII

THE cruise of the *Musidora* ended a few weeks later at Brindisi. Watson had arranged to turn the yacht over there to her owner, Sir Archibald Kirmeston, a new peer, who had made a fortune in trade, but was still not above turning an honest sovereign by letting his craft to rich Americans who would pay his price. There the Montgomerys, who had continued as Leila's guests up to that time, took the *rapide* for Paris, and the Blounts boarded a P. and O. steamer for Ismailia *en route* for Cairo. For Leila, fascinated

by Tangier, amused by Algiers and delighted by Tunis, craved another glimpse of North African picturesqueness before returning to the more familiar sights and sounds of Continental Europe.

She had visited Cairo several years before, accompanied by Miss Lottimer and a Greek courier, but she longed now for the fulfilment of promises then made, when she had seemed always on the verge of what the conventions forbade. As a married woman, accompanied by a husband to whom Cairo was only a little less familiar than London or Paris, there appeared no reason why its innermost secrets should not be revealed to her.

It chanced, however, that at Shepheard's, on the day of her arrival, she fell in with two old acquaintances, stars

of conspicuous magnitude in the galaxy of celebrities there gathered. One of these was the distinguished English society actress, Mrs. Fitzherbert, and the other the no less distinguished American novelist and war correspondent, Mr. William Henry Travers, each shedding a scintillant and distinctive lustre in a constellation which included a Russian grand duke, an exiled prince—whose titles filled five lines in the Almanac di Gotha; a famous French portrait painter; an English dowager duchess; a diva from La Scala, and the young and rich widow of a United States Senator.

Into this group of social and artistic luminaries the Blounts swung almost immediately, with the result that their days and nights were taken up with a succes-

sion of diversions very much at variance with the general programme which Leila had projected. There were coaching trips, and motor excursions, and polo matches, and pony races, and cricket games, and golf tournaments; and there were dinner parties and concerts and dances, amid a general atmosphere of what we are prone to regard as our advanced civilization; rather than a study of the manners and customs of the children of the desert; their occupations and amusements and religious rites, after which Leila had come and for which she still longed.

But circumstance for the time being had turned her quest aside, and the nearest approach she experienced to her heart's desire was when during tea, on

the marble terrace of the hotel, she caught glimpses through the palms of the passing panorama of the street; the solemn dignified camels, neatly shaven and gorgeously accoutred, bearing mysterious looking veiled women, and led by brilliantly-garbed Arabs; the trumpeting brown-legged sais, with tasseled fezes and long wands preceding and making way for the carriages of their masters or mistresses; the oddly clipped and glitteringly necklaced donkeys and the long blue-bloused donkey boys; the long-haired and bearded conjurers and the half-naked fortune tellers; the perfume sellers, the turquoise pedlers, and the venders of monkeys; the soldiers of the Khedive and the soldiers of the king; the jeweled and gewgawed dancing girls, and the unveiled

Coptic women from an adjacent village.

The picture came to her in segregated sections, separated by snatches of conversation across teacups, anecdotes and gossip, compliments and pretty speeches.

One afternoon she found herself next to Mrs. Fitzherbert, to whom she spoke of having bought a wonderful turquoise necklace at Tangier.

"Tangier!" cried the woman who had once been considered the most beautiful in all England. "Were you there, my dear? How long ago? I wonder if by any chance you met Flossie Leigh? I hear she is there now. The Viscount, you know, is at Gibraltar, and——"

Instinctively Leila had looked about for Dickie; but he was at another table quite out of ear shot.

"Flossie Leigh?" she queried, interrupting.

"Yes; surely you remember. She used to be at the Gaiety. Big blonde creature with a simply superb figure. She was the girl that young George Heatherly was mad over. I don't remember just how many thousand pounds he spent on her, but it was some tremendous amount. Then he went into bankruptcy, and not long after there was that scandal about Lady Bathurst's diamonds, and poor George disappeared."

"You knew him?" Leila asked, hurriedly, making a grim effort to hide her sudden emotion. Her heart was beating wildly and she felt the blood pounding in her temples.

"No, not personally. I saw him once

in a box when I was playing at the Haymarket," drawled the beauty, "a handsome fellow, as I remember him, but I'd never recognize him again. Flossie was with him, and was wearing a plastron of emeralds as big as a soup plate. When the smash came I was in America, but I had the whole story from Rosie Trenlow, the Gaiety girl who married the Marquis of Melbrook, you know. And then for the Viscount to act as he did, was really quite shocking."

After weeks of resolute battle against a curiosity which she deemed unworthy, Leila's defences gave way. On board the *Musidora* there had been a brand new, flaming red copy of Burke's Peerage, to open which and turn to the name Heatherly had been a constant and powerful

temptation, but she had fought it with all the force of her womanly dignity and sense of fair play. She had felt that she possessed no right to pry into the affairs of the man whose protection she had chosen to borrow. Since he had volunteered her no specific information as to his past or his family relations, just as he had asked none of her, it was only fair to conclude that he preferred to keep these matters unrevealed, and this being so, it would be eminently unfair, she told herself, to seek knowledge or even accept it should it lie ready at her hand.

But the Fates it seemed had combined to thrust certain facts upon her. First had come that unsolicited story from Prince Valori; then the picture in the London newspaper; followed by the en-

counter with the blonde woman in the street of Tangier, and the name of George echoing above the Babel of the thoroughfare; and now, as unexpectedly and as unsought as any of the other disclosures, this tale from the lips of Esther Fitzherbert.

Having unwittingly learned so much it was perhaps best, she concluded, to ascertain the rest. That Richard Blount and George Heatherly were the same, she entertained no doubt, and that a relationship existed between George Heatherly and Lieutenant Colonel Lord Heatherly, she was more than well assured. The resemblance between the man whom she had married and the man whose picture she had seen could be accounted for in no other way.

She bent a little forward until, looking between a swaying palm leaf and the leonine head of the French portrait painter, who sat opposite, she fixed her eyes upon the finely cut profile of the man who filled her thoughts. He was bending forward, too, at the moment, placing his cup upon the table, and laughing at some sally of the Italian diva.

"Tell me," she said, with a calmness that belied her interest, "what Viscount are you speaking of?"

"Viscount Heatherly, of course," returned the actress, as she helped herself to a crumpet, "the lieutenant-colonel. He actually, it was found, had been making eyes at his brother's sweetheart, and, when George disappeared, he gracelessly stepped into his place. There was no

end of talk over it, and for a while it was thought he would have to resign his commission; and then, after a few years had slipped by, and every one imagined the thing was forgotten, he and his regiment were shipped off to Gibraltar, as a sort of deferred punishment. Of course it was quite impossible for Flossie to go there—that would have stirred the whole nauseous mess up again—but she lost no time in getting down to Tangier and has now, so I am told, the finest suite of rooms that the Continental affords."

The French portrait painter, smiling, shook his head.

"Ah, you English!" he commented, "and you dare to reflect on French morals! *A beau se lever tard qui a le bruit de se lever matin.*"

Mrs. Fitzherbert shrugged her shapely shoulders.

"*Chaque pays a sa guise,*" she returned.

Travers, who was sitting at the next table, leaned back and called across:

"His Royal Highness has proposed a visit to the pyramids by moonlight. We are to start at ten in motor cars."

The others accepted enthusiastically, laughing, declaring it would be jolly, *charmante,* but Leila had not heard. She was gazing with unseeing eyes across the terrace, her ears deaf to everything save the echo of the story she had just heard. Presently she got up, excused herself on the pretext of a headache, and sought her rooms.

Later she sent word to her husband

that she was indisposed and begged that he would not consider her in the disposal of his evening. The note was brought to Blount while he was dressing. It had been given to his man by Félisie, and the maid had gone before he could make any inquiries. When, however, he had got into his evening clothes, he went himself to Leila's apartments and asked if there was anything he could do. He seemed most anxious about her, and his anxiety touched her. She was nervously overwrought, and his solicitude caused her to become hysterical.

When he came away he was very much distressed. The prospect of the moonlight excursion without her did not appeal to him and, as he dined alone, he endeavored to find some plausible excuse

for a withdrawal of his acceptance, without making it appear that he regarded his wife's indisposition in any way serious. But he was not over ready at invention, and his dinner finished, he lit a cigar and strolled out onto the terrace, now ablaze with electrics, still casting about for a pretext.

Near the hotel entrance, he observed signs indicative of fresh arrivals. Porters were making their way in haste toward the street whence there came a clatter of dropping luggage and an echo of voices in dispute over charges. Hotel guests and loungers were moving in that direction, too, or interestedly craning their necks and straining their eyes for glimpses of the newcomers.

"Some people returning from a trip up the Nile."

It was Travers who volunteered the information. He had appeared suddenly at Blount's elbow.

"Come, let's have a look at them," he added, as if they were giants from Darfur or pigmies from Bimberi; and as he elbowed a passage Dickie lounged in his wake.

A woman was coming up the steps as they reached the edge of the crowd. She was tall, and there was a supple grace in her movement as, with one hand holding up her rather clinging linen skirt, she strove with the other to raise from her face a long and enveloping veil. A gray-bearded man in tweeds had preceded her, and a maid and a man servant were close

behind, but Richard Blount saw only her. His face had grown suddenly hard and there was a suggestion of vindictiveness in his half-lowered lids, his compressed lips and the firm set of his jaw. He recognized her perfectly before the lifted veil gave him sight of the sun-browned oval of her face, with its long, heavy-lashed brown eyes, its arched brows, straight nose and small, but sensual mouth. She passed within three feet of him, but as she glanced to neither right nor left, she did not see him, and he turned away a little disappointed. He had hoped that she might read in his expression his estimate of her—an estimate he was too much of a gentleman ever to put into words.

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"If I'm not very much mistaken," he

heard Travers saying, "that was Lord and Lady Bathurst. I saw him once at Johannesburg, after the Boer War, and she was pointed out to me at a garden party at Sandringham several years ago. It's part of my profession, you know, Blount, never to forget a face."

"I dare say," Dickie returned, shortly. He was not in a mood for the American's reminiscences, and he showed it. "If you'll pardon me, I'm off for a stroll. I've an engagement with a chap down the Ezbekeyeh road."

* * *

It was nearly eleven o'clock when he returned to Shepheard's and the motoring party to the pyramids had been gone over half an hour.

When on the following morning he

went to make his apologies to the Grand Duke, he left Mrs. Fitzherbert with Leila. She had come in to inquire after her and had stopped to gossip.

"I only wish I could be ill over night and look as fit as you do in the morning, my dear," she drawled, her lace-clad figure, silhouetted against the dark background of the cushions on which she leaned, showing all the slender symmetry of a woman half her years.

Leila looked at her in wonder. She had never before realized fully what a marvelously preserved creature Mrs. Fitzherbert was. She remembered well how the actress, on the occasion of her first visit to America, had come to California, and how the crowds had beseiged her carriage when she drove and blocked her

way when she went to walk. Leila was then only a small child, but she had seen and worshipped and once had run after her with her little arms full of roses as an offering, because she embodied for her all that was ideally beautiful and talented and gracious in womankind.

The whirligig of time had brought to Leila what many considered a beauty superior to Mrs. Fitzherbert's. This was now at its zenith, but she felt, with a pang, that she could hardly dare hope it would prove as lasting.

"We missed you fearfully last night," the Englishwoman declared. "I do so wish you could have been along. And just fancy who at the very last moment were shanghaied into your places! I know you'd never imagine. The Bath-

ursts, of all people in the world. They had just come in from a trip up the Nile as far as Beni Asem."

"The Bathursts!" exclaimed Leila, sitting up, suddenly, startled from her half-recumbent position, "Lady Bathurst?"

"Yes, dear. Do you know her?"

"No; oh, no," Leila hastened to assure her friend, "but you were speaking of her yesterday, and——"

"Yes, I remember. That's why it struck me as odd that they should appear. And yet that sort of thing so invariably happens that I don't know why we should be surprised by it. Well, Lord Bathurst is an old bear, and Evelyn is so overwhelmingly conceited that I never could abide her for long at a time. Besides, I have always hated her for letting the im-

plication get abroad that George Heatherly took her jewels."

Leila sat crouching now on the edge of her cushioned chair; her gray eyes large with interest.

"But why shouldn't she?" she inquired, earnestly. "Do you think one guilty of such a dastardly performance deserves consideration?"

Mrs. Fitzherbert smiled at the younger woman's indignation.

"Oh, dear, no," she rejoined with decision, "not if one be guilty. But it isn't fair—Now, is it?—to blacken a poor man's reputation by innuendo when you haven't anything more stable to go upon than mere suspicion?"

"But I thought——" Leila began.

"That was her trouble," Mrs. Fitzher-

bert interrupted, "she thought. And that was her excuse; but, you see, she had no right to make her thoughts public."

"I know, dear; but she may have had reasons that you and I know nothing of; and after all it has never been proved—Has it?—that she was wrong."

Mrs. Fitzherbert paused a moment before answering. She readjusted her position against the cushions, and smoothed back a refractory tendril of glossy brown hair. She was enough of an actress to understand the enhancing value of suspense in embellishing a line or a situation.

"Certainly it has," she answered, "proved by her own lips."

Leila rose to her feet, and stood, a little dazed, while her heart sank and her pulses quickened. Instantly, however, she

controlled herself. Seating herself beside her caller on the divan, she said, with an affectation of merely casual interest:

"Tell me about it. Do you mean that she has confessed she was mistaken?"

"It was after we had marveled at the impressive grandeur of the sphinx bathed in the cold flood of the Egyptian moonshine and each of us had made our little comment and I had quoted Maspero and Willie Travers had quoted himself, and we had adjourned to the little hotel there at Gizah, where the Grand Duke had ordered supper. Lady Bathurst, who had been drinking champagne as if she never expected to see another bottle, asked me if I'd mind going outside with her as she found the room unbearably close. And out there on the desert sands, my dear,

she made me her *confidante*. I don't remember just how it came about, but she arrived there in some fashion. She said it had been preying on her mind for ages, that she knew she had wronged poor George; that he had scarcely dared show his face in England, and was traveling somewhere in heathen lands under a false name, all because she had been so wicked as to let people think he had robbed her. When she found out the real culprit it was too late to do anything, and—Well, it had wrecked her body and mind, though a more healthy looking object I never have seen. It had driven her, she said, to overindulgence in wine and she had recently taken to drugs as well. Oh, a most pitiful story, I can tell you; though I can't say I did pity her, or do, the least bit."

Leila was nervously twisting her rings.

"You believe her?" she asked, a little anxiously.

"Oh, perfectly," Mrs. Fitzherbert answered. "That is, of course, with regard to the main point," she qualified. "I don't look on her as a nervous and physical wreck, though, by any means. I told her she should have published a card in the *Times* and the *Morning Post*, but it seems there were reasons."

"She didn't tell you, of course, who the real culprit was?"

"No she didn't *tell* me. But she let me draw my own conclusions, and I wouldn't mind making a wager of a hundred guineas that it was old Lord Bathurst, himself. He is really, you know, a most unconscionable old scoundrel, and

how Evelyn manages to put up with him is more than I can understand. He's enough to drive any woman to the bottle and the hypodermic needle."

Mrs. Fitzherbert rose. "I hope I haven't bored you, my dear," she added, "but it seemed to me after telling you what I did yesterday, it was only fair that I should set poor George Heatherly right. You might meet him some day, you know, traveling about as you do, and for you to have such an erroneous impression of him would be most unfortunate."

When Mrs. Fitzherbert had gone Leila wrote a note, which she despatched by Félisie, and later in the day she received a visitor, who was closeted with her for half an hour. The next day the Blounts left Cairo, for Brindisi.

The months of April and May they spent in Italy, visiting Rome, Naples, Florence, and Venice. From Venice they made their way into the Tyrol, but June found them in Paris occupying one of the most sumptuous of the many palatial flats which abound in the region of the Bois, not a stone's throw from the Petit Trianon of the Boni di Castellanes.

VIII

DICKIE BLOUNT, sitting at one of the round tin-topped tables of the Pré Catalan, a glass of milk untasted before him, drew from his pocket a newspaper and for the fourth time that morning read a paragraph which, as if seeking obscurity, nestled low down in the second column of a left-hand inside page.

The Pré Catalan was well nigh deserted. The visitors who arrive at dawn from Maxime's and kindred all-night resorts, clad in all the bravery of dinner toilets, there to drink milk or, more likely, whiskey and soda, amid nature's own un-

spotted environment had come and gone, and it was yet too early for the invasion of the children and their *bonnes* who make this bit of Arcadia their forenoon rendezvous. Now and then an equestrian cantered in, slid from his saddle, slipped his bridle rein through his arm and called "Froid," to the little waiter, who at the sound of hoofs emerged from the square door of the tiny châlet; but save for such occasional interruptions and the intermittent appearance of a prowling cat or the infrequent squawk of a sleepy parrot, Blount was permitted to muse undisturbed in the sylvan solitude he had sought.

He refolded his paper, presently, and returned it to his pocket, with a gesture of some impatience. He was vexed with

himself that he had permitted that little obscure but pregnant paragraph to disturb in any wise the even tenor of his plans, for there was no denying that he had given the opportunities that it suggested more than passing consideration. But it had come before him at a moment when, of all times within the past four or five months, it had been possible for it to appeal: a moment when he had grown skeptical concerning the practicability of continuing in his present anomalous position, if not indeed dissatisfied. In such a crisis it had seemed to offer a Providential means of release; but the problem presented was not so much whether he could depend upon this as a savior as whether, after all, he had any desire to be saved. He had lain awake a good

portion of the night debating this question and had risen at an unconscionably early hour and carried it out with him on a brisk walk through the cool green of the Bois.

The tidings of his father's death had come to him by accident, through the medium of this French newspaper, weeks after its occurrence. It had happened while Leila and he were at Innsbruck, and it caused him a sensation that he could hardly define or comprehend, to realize that he was so cut off from home and family associations that a domestic event of such import could happen without so much as a whisper reaching him until nearly a month had passed. It was not regret that he felt—he had severed his relations with his kinsfolk deliber-

ately,—believing that he had been given more than ample provocation for a step so serious—nor was it a new sense of injury. It was rather something like an admixture of melancholy, self doubt and a depressing consciousness of the hollow futility of all things sublunary.

His father had been to him not only inconsiderate, but cruel. He preferred not to recall at this time certain experiences of his earlier manhood lest he should think of the dead with an emotion more unworthy than simple indifference. For that reason the mere fact of the paternal demise was scarcely sufficient to account for the dolour of his mood, and he had fancied that in the manner and tardiness of the tidings lay the excuse for his sensations.

There were, however, other circumstances at this time which combined to give to his train of thought a more sombre coloring than usually characterized his reflections. While in certain respects there had been no lessening of that kindly, unselfish consideration with which Leila had chosen to treat him since the earliest days of their strange alliance, there had been, since their return to Paris especially, a growing tendency on her part to encourage the attentions, not to say the admiration, of other men. Only yesterday, at the running of the Grand Prix, she had permitted the young Count de Brissac to occupy the place beside her for half an hour at least, pointing out the celebrities and notables as they passed, and had accepted his tip on the event as

well, losing a thousand francs by it, in preference to the choice he had himself recommended, which came in first by three lengths and won him ten times that sum.

And last night, at Paillard's, where they were dining, she had bowed to that Italian roué, Valori, who had subsequently spoken to her in the *entresol,* obtained her address and received permission to call. Though he refused to believe that these and kindred acts were inspired by any wish on her part to humiliate him, or otherwise cause him annoyance, he was nevertheless conscious of a feeling not so much of resentment as of disappointment.

As her nominal husband, at least, he could not countenance any action on her

part which would reflect in any wise on her good name, and indirectly on his own honor; and association with such men as the Count de Brissac and Prince Valori was not calculated to elevate Leila in the esteem of good people nor to give to the world a very high estimate of his capacity as a lord protective. This he knew, and yet his position was so equivocal that to remonstrate was to assume an attitude which he feared might be misunderstood, and from which, therefore, he incontinently shrank.

It was at this point of his self-communion that the alternative suggested by the news of his father's death had presented itself. He had, it was true, made the bargain for a year, and he had made it in all good faith; but, he asked himself, if

it were not possible, judging from Leila's recent changed demeanor, that she would be pleased if he could find an excuse for bringing the arrangement to an end in advance of that period. He could now very readily induce her to believe that his inheritance would make a continuance of their compact quite out of the question. As a matter of fact, he had inherited nothing whatever, everything going to his brother, but that was a detail which she would not be likely to learn, and he was reasonably well assured that she would make no demur to the speedy bringing about of the end. In this way he would be relieved of the unpleasant duty of criticising her choice of associates, and would once more be at liberty to roam whither inclination dictated, rather

than at the whim of a somewhat capricious woman.

Several times he had weighed these alternatives, and with each successive weighing the scales had swung lower and lower on the side of duty, since inclination, in spite of all his arguments, had helped to carry the balance that way. And now, as he got up from the little round, tin-topped table in the Pré Catalan and strode off, his milk still untasted, he smiled at the revelation which had come to him.

His eyes were open, and he saw that he had been all the while blindfolding himself. Honor! *His* honor! Was it so clean a thing that he should fear this woman of the most incomparably beautiful character he had ever known, would

sully it? Had he thought of that when he so readily sold himself into her service? And, if he had, would it have made a hair's weight of difference? Oh, no. Because he was not in love with Leila Merlin then. But now—yes, there was no need to disguise it further; no need to blind his eyes to what his heart saw—now, it was different. He was jealous. That was the whole root and branch of his trouble. Jealous of every smile she gave to other men; of every word she spoke to them; of every minute passed in their company. Jealous because he loved her with an affection that would balk at no sacrifice; worshipped her with an adoration that set her above the queens of earth and the goddesses of his mythology, and craved her with all the pas-

sionate yearning of a ripe and virile manhood.

And then his smile at having overcome his self-deception hardened into a grimace at the recollection that he, paradoxical as it might seem, was the one man in all the world who was in honor bound to voice no word of the emotions which swayed him.

Nor was this the most bitter ingredient of the cup that was at his lips. That lay in the thought that by accepting the part of watch dog in her service he had placed himself on a level, not merely from which he could not sue for her favor, but on which there was no possibility of her ever condescending to smile. She had hired him as a convenience and she was paying him more than generously for the service

he performed. As his employer she had been most kind, but it was idle to hope that she might experience for him any sentiment beyond that of appreciation of a labor well done—a part well played.

At the end of the specified year she would, in all probability, be quite ready for the divorce which would free him and give to her opportunity for a more conventional alliance with one of the many whom he was now holding in probation.

Again his hand sought the newspaper in the deep pocket of his long gray sacque coat, and as he drew it forth and tore it into small bits, his thoughts reverted to his brother, who was doubtless back in England. For him the event which the paper chronicled meant a very great deal, and Blount wondered, not without envy,

whether, if the situation were altered and he, himself, were the inheritor, he might even then, with titles and estates, aspire to the blissful consummation he pictured and for which he hungered.

Of his father's death he resolved to speak no word to Leila. From the very first he had carefully refrained from giving any hint of his family connections, partly from pride and partly because he had vowed when he banished himself from England that he would drop a curtain between his past and his future. There were times when he fancied she might have learned something of his antecedents, but she had given him no sign and he preferred to take it for granted that she was still in ignorance.

There was very little, however, as has

been seen, that did not reach Leila through one channel or another, despite the fact that she had so studiously declined to seek information of this character, and the news which Richard would now have kept from her came to her on that same afternoon from the lips of Prince Valori, who having secured permission to call had lost no time in availing himself of the privilege.

She had just returned from driving in the Bois when his card was brought to her, and as she took it from Félisie, who had received it from the butler, she asked herself why she had failed to invent some means of evading this visit. It was not that she disliked the Prince. She had found him at times most amusing, and his ardent admiration for her, which was

a matter of three years' standing, was, if not always so delicately expressed, certainly so easily kept within bounds as not to be displeasing. But she rather dreaded an encounter between Valori and her husband. She knew very well that Dickie's trip to Genoa on the day the Prince was to call on her at Verezzo was prompted by a desire to avoid the embarrassment of a meeting, and she reproached herself now for having made such a contretemps possible here in Paris. The incident of the photograph, too, must add to the awkwardness of the situation.

She was tempted to say she was not at home, but she fancied her caller could not have failed seeing her alight from her Victoria, so quickly had his card followed her to her boudoir.

She glanced at her trinket of a clock. It marked a few minutes after five. Dickie, who had gone to Longchamp, would not, in all probability, return before seven. She might, therefore, she assured herself, dismiss her fears; and so deciding she gave word that she would see His Highness presently, and directed that tea be served in the *salon*.

The picture which Leila presented when, framed by the dainty beauty of the Louis Quinze room with its panels, its frescoes, and its pale tints, she laid her hand in Prince Valori's, was one to stir the senses of a less susceptible cavalier than this warm-blooded Latin. She wore the filmiest of white mull, embroidered in white butterflies, a Caillot creation sent home that very day, as elegant as it was

simple, which accentuated the long sweeping graceful curves of her slender supple figure, her slight hips, her girlish bust. And above this her well-poised head with its wealth of dark hair, her rich ivory and rose complexion, her long-lashed expressive gray eyes and her tender, red-lipped mouth with its smile of welcome.

The eyes of the Prince glowed with appreciative admiration.

"You are wonderful, madame," he said, emotion in his tone. "You surpass yourself. Each day you seem born again more beautiful than yesterday." And he kissed her hand with more restraint than his manner threatened.

Leila remarked deprecatingly on the extravagance of Italian compliments in general, and the Prince, while admitting

more than half of the arraignment, ably defended himself in the present cause, adding that his poor English tongue was too feeble to give adequate expression to what his fervid Italian soul dictated.

They sat near a window which looked down on the Avenue de Bois de Boulogne, and Leila busied herself with the tea things, speaking meanwhile of her Mediterranean cruise, asking pardon for not having sent him word of her sudden and unpremeditated desertion of the Riviera, and inquiring as to his own movements in the interim. The Prince, with unabated gallantry, described the crushing disappointment consequent upon his second visit to the Villa Spicca, and insisted that he had existed since only in the hope that again their paths might cross. It

was Fate, he declared, that had sent him the evening before to Paillard's on the Champs Elysée. It was a restaurant he seldom visited. He had gone first to the Ambassadeurs, but had found it impossible to secure a table.

"And the people with whom you were dining?" he asked, interestedly, "the man I thought I recognized. Not your husband, but the tall, fair man, with the bare face? He was, I thought—— But, no, it cannot be."

"Mr. Blount and I had as our guests two New York friends," she answered, a little nervously, "the Jack Hallidays."

"It was a coincidence, then; but, do you know, I thought—I was, indeed, almost sure that it was the fellow whose picture I saw at the Villa Spicca, and

whose story I told to you and you did not hear."

His eyes were two interrogation points. Leila saw them and looked away, trusting her own eyes had not answered. She glanced out of the window at the procession on the Avenue. All the world seemed returning from the Bois.

"Look!" she cried, with an effort at diversion, "it is the President. See the postilions!"

But Valori was not interested. He turned his head for an instant only, murmuring, "Ah, yes," and then, replacing his tea cup upon the table, he resumed the subject which evidently appealed to him.

"You told me, I think," he continued, "that he was your husband's friend?"

And there was the suspicion of a sneer in his tone.

"Of whom are you speaking?" Leila asked, coldly.

"Of George Heatherly, whose photograph I saw."

"I do not know any George Heatherly," she affirmed, boldly. "Let me give you some more tea, Prince. No? Oh, tell me, did you see La Belle Otero at the Grand Prix?"

But he was not to be diverted. A suspicion had been born and he wished to nurture it to confirmation.

"No, madame," he answered, shortly, and then went on: "George Heatherly's photograph was on your piano, and you told me it belonged to your husband. Two weeks ago his father died in Eng-

land. I have been wondering whether he would now drop his incognito and return to his native land. He is now next in succession, you know, since his brother is unmarried. His father was——"

There was a step in the passage and a figure appeared in the doorway. Leila's voice cut short the Prince's revelation.

"My husband is here," she said, her voice higher-pitched and vibrant. "Richard, you remember Prince Valori, whom we met at Nice?"

As Blount came forward the Italian rose. To Leila the air seemed surcharged with some dangerously volatile essence that threatened explosion. There was a baleful glint in the dark eyes of the Prince, and Dickie's face was stern to grimness. They bowed formally, but

neither spoke nor offered to shake hands.

"You have been to the races?" Leila asked in a desperate attempt to relieve the tenseness of the situation.

Her husband turned to her, his visage a shade relaxed.

"No," he answered, "I've been to the pigeon-shooting club. There was some excellent sport there." And then he added, quickly, "If you'll excuse me I'll leave you for a little. There are some matters that I must see to at once, in the library."

Again he bowed stiffly to Valori, and, having traversed the length of the *salon,* disappeared through the door at its farthest end. When the door closed the Prince resumed his seat. He was smiling now, a self-satisfied victorious smile, in

which there was, too, something of impertinent patronage.

"Ah ha!" he murmured, chuckling. "So the mystery is no longer a mystery, my dear Mrs. Blount. But I am so sorry, so really sorry, my poor, dear friend."

Leila felt her cheeks burning. Indignation rose hot within her, and angry words rushed to her lips. His commiseration was unbearable.

"I am not exactly a subject for sympathy," she said with more composure than she had believed herself capable of. "There is no earthly reason why you should be sorry for me."

The Prince twisted the silky black hairs of his mustache between his thumb and forefinger.

"But you do not know," he insisted, still smiling, "you do not know. You fancy you have married a gentleman and you have married only a—what shall I say?"

"I beg you will say nothing," Leila put in quickly. "If you persist, I shall refuse to listen to you. It is perhaps best, Prince Valori, that we should say good-by."

He leaned back in his chair laughing.

"Oh, no, no," he protested, "I will not be dismissed so summarily. As an old friend, as one who was once more than friend——"

"You were never that, never," she cried, rising, her eyes blazing, her lips trembling, "and since you refuse to go at my bidding, I shall be compelled to take other measures."

"You can't afford to continue as the wife of this fellow."
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"Just one moment," he pleaded, rising, too, and plucking at the filmy folds of her sleeve. His manner had suddenly changed. He was no longer amused. He felt that he had been subjected to insult, and all his native vindictiveness rose in defence of his pride.

Leila drew away her arm with a gesture of repugnance, and his hand slipped to her wrist and held it.

"Listen!" he said, his lip curling until it exposed his small, sharp teeth. "Listen to me. You can't afford to continue as the wife of this fellow whom people say——"

"I don't care what people say," she cried, as she struggled to free herself from his grasp. "People say what is not true."

"Sometimes, yes; but not always. People have said things of you and me, *ma chère.*"

Her struggles appeared to excite the animal of his nature. He tightened his grip and drew her closer until her body touched his.

"Untrue things," she retorted, breathless; "lies, lies, lies."

"They have said we spent a night together in a châlet at Rochers de Naye. That was no lie."

Her blood rushed hot through her veins at the grossness of the charge, and for a second she was dumb with rage.

"How dare you!" she cried, at last, with snapping eyes. "Oh, how dare you! Knowing as well as I do that it was all a horrible, torturing accident; that blind-

ing snow storm which prevented our return to Territet, that tiny refuge with its single spare room in which I lay shivering and sleepless behind a bolted door while you slept in the parlor below! Oh, how dare you say that what people—vile, evil-minded people—have said is true?"

He was smiling again now at her exasperation.

"You should have married me," he argued, sardonically, "and stopped their wagging tongues; married me, a prince of a house——"

"Release me!" she demanded, suddenly recalled to her position by feeling his breath hot upon her cheek. "Instantly! Do you hear? Or will you force me to call for assistance?"

There was no mistaking the determina-

tion of her tone, and the Italian's fingers loosened their clasp. Before he quite realized her intent she had sped the length of the *salon* and flung open the library door.

"Dickie!" she called, "Prince Valori is going. I thought perhaps you would care to see him as far as the *ascenseur.*"

If there was nothing in the words there was much in the manner of their utterance to arouse Blount to a realization that all was not well. He came instantly, and, passing Leila without so much as a glance, followed the Prince across the passage and out onto the wide, marble-tiled gallery, with its palms and lemon trees, which served as a vestibule to the apartment.

Once beyond ear shot of the *salon* he

laid his hand none too gently on His Highness's shoulder.

"Tell me," he commanded, "what this means?"

The Prince was hot with irritation, and the question was as a draught to the flame which consumed him. Discretion boiled over and he turned savagely upon his questioner.

"Means?" he repeated, hoarsely. *"Dio Mio!* Am I answerable to you? Well, then, it means that I wished to tell your wife such things as I know about you, and which she did not care to hear. I wished to tell her that she has thrown herself away upon a beggar and a thief."

Before the word could echo the Prince Valori lay sprawling on the marble floor of the gallery. Blount's blow had caught

him where his beard parted at the chin, and had sent him reeling backward against the iron grating which framed the elevator shaft. The fall had therefore been accompanied with a crashing sound, and Leila, who had anxiously followed after, appeared suddenly from under an archway formed by two towering and interlacing palms.

She saw her husband bending forward and the Prince struggling to his feet. At that instant, hearing the rustle of her skirts behind him, Dickie turned.

"It was most unfortunate," he said, in explanation, "Prince Valori slipped on the marble tiling. He tells me, by the way, that you were not ready to-day to listen to some revelations he desired to make. Possibly you will be so good as

to tell him when you will be more in the mood to hear what he has to tell you."

The Prince nervously pressed the electric button of the *ascenseur*.

"My doors are closed to Prince Valori, henceforth," returned Leila, quietly. "Nothing he could possibly say would be of the slightest interest to me."

IX

THE Blounts were house-hunting in England. They had been so occupied for a week, and Leila had about decided that, after all, it would have been better to have left it to Watson. Each day had only served to bring its disappointment. Their London headquarters was Claridge's, whence they had made motor excursions into all the surrounding country, guided by letters from agents, tips from interested friends, and occasional advertisements. They had traveled northwest as far as Leamington, in Warwickshire; northeast to Hadleigh,

in Suffolk; southeast to Faversham, in Kent, and now they were returning from Staplefield, in Sussex, the most southern point of their circuit.

It was mid-August and all the countryside was parched and dusty from a long drought. The day had been exceptionally warm for England at this season, but suddenly a cool breeze had sprung up from the south, and the sky had become overcast with dark, scurrying clouds.

Dickie, leather-coated and goggled, sat in the chauffeur's seat, his hand on the steering wheel, with Leila, veiled to the point of obscurity, beside him, while Felix, the machinist, lounged in the tonneau behind. They had stopped at Depford Bridge for tea, which was served to them in the quaint old garden of the

inn, fragrant with the white and purple flowers of the nicotiana and gorgeous with the blaze of marigolds. They had lingered there in the restful quiet while the sun had crept up the hillside, leaving the garden in cool shadow, experiencing such a sense of peaceful repose as had not been theirs for months. And they had resumed their places in the car for the last stage of the journey back to London with what savored very strongly of reluctance.

"We have been rather going it," Leila remarked through the meshes of her veil, as the machine swung out onto the high-road and pointed away for Dorsett, "and I'm willing to admit that I'm thoroughly tired and fairly long for the simple life. But I'm not so weary that I will lay me

down in a place that doesn't suit me, just for the sake of the lying. I'm afraid, Dickie, you think I'm very hard to please."

Blount laughed, indulgently.

"No," he answered, "not too hard. I rather believe, myself, in getting what one wants, and not taking a poor substitute. But perhaps you have an impossible ideal."

"But I haven't," she argued, with decision. "I have read of hundreds of just such places in English novels, and English novelists certainly describe what they know to exist, don't they? Haven't you often read of dear, old, wonderful, rambling, crumbling houses, 'a river at the garden's end, a terrace walk, and half a rood of land,' etc., etc.?"

"Often; very often; and I've seen them, too. Saw one to-day, for that matter," Dickie laughed.

"To-day!" she cried, with indignation. "You don't imagine I could be happy in that barn of a place, with its stone floors, and its mouldy old wainscoting, and all the rooms smelling of chimney soot."

"They're all rather like that, I'm afraid."

"Then you should have told me," she complained.

"But I didn't know you objected. I fancied I was performing my whole duty when I fell in with your plans without demur."

There was something in the way he said this; something which smacked of bitterness and suggested a struggle

against inclination, that awakened Leila to a sudden consciousness of having been cruelly selfish in dragging him into England. But after a month at Trouville and Dinard and Ostend she had grown unutterably weary of the butterfly existence she had been pursuing, and an English rural life had appealed to her as the most desirable of all imaginable antidotes. She had, however, hesitated to suggest it to her husband because she fancied he had no great desire to return to his native soil; but the idea ultimately became an obsession, and when at mention of it Dickie had offered no word of objection, she had proceeded at once to put it into execution, without stopping to consider at what cost his silent passivity was secured.

"You mean," she interpreted, turning

her veiled face toward him, a world of sympathy in her hidden eyes, "you mean that you didn't wish to come to England?"

There was sympathy in her voice, too, and he heard it; heard the startled regret and dismay in her tone and cherished it and was glad.

"Whither thou goest I will go," he quoted, lightly. "But I'm free to admit that I should not have chosen England had I been asked to select a destination. Don't mistake me," he added, quickly, "I love the country—I could even be content in one of its stone-floored, musty-wainscoted, soot-smelling old houses, such as we saw to-day—but there are people here with whom it is oppressive to breathe the same air, and that is why I

vowed once I'd never again set foot on English soil."

For a little Leila was silent. The car was speeding along the broad highway between the impressively abrupt heights of Fox Hill, on the right, and the mysteriously whispering murmur of the great woods of Hatchworth Park, on the left. Straight before them and a little below—lower still in the valley—were the red roofs of Dorsett, now glowing as live coals against the gray mists which smoke-like swept down from the neighboring hills. Overhead the heavy clouds, leaden-hued, rolled in Titanic masses, and on the rising gale there came to them at intervals the deep, ominous mutter of distant thunder.

"But——" Leila presently began, and

hesitated as a gust of wind loosened an end of her veil and carried it fluttering across her husband's face. When she had recovered it and made it fast again, she asked: "But why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't consider it worth while," he answered, nonchalantly. "After all, what does it matter?"

"It matters a great deal," she said, seriously, "I don't want you to be unhappy. We'll go somewhere else. We'll take a country place in France."

"But I'm not unhappy," he protested, a great wave of pleasure surging over him at this renewed evidence of her unfailing consideration. She did not love him; of that he was quite sure. He had begun to doubt—not without a sense of

satisfaction—that she would ever love any man. She was one of those women, he told himself, who are incapable of a great passion; but she was more than kind, with a kindliness that was almost maternal. "If you are able to find such a place as you want, here, by all means do so. I shall be very content, I assure you," he added.

"I should have known," she persisted, with self-rebuke, "I must have been blind not to see."

The wind had increased; a hurricane swept across them as they plunged down the gradient which led into Dorsett's High street, and the rain began to fall in great splashing drops.

"Shall we stop at the inn until this storm passes?" he asked, and then added,

quickly: "I think, myself, we shall be able to outrun it. Once we get over Cranmore Common, which is at the top of the hill beyond Dorsett, I'm sure we'll be out of it. The sun was still shining there a minute ago."

Leila was anxious to go on.

"I love the storm," she said; "it's glorious."

Blount reached for the change-speed lever, and threw in the high speed.

"We'll chance it," he cried, as the motor spun onward with its accelerated velocity, and the rain pelted drenchingly into their faces.

In the High Street few persons were abroad. Nearly every one had fled for shelter, and vehicles were as scarce as human creatures. Before the solid Geor-

gian portals of the Red Lion Inn they caught a glimpse of a brewer's dray, the horses standing with heads dejectedly lowered; a child with a jug of supper beer darted across the road under their very wheels, escaping death by a hair's breadth; a flock of gray geese, with necks stretched and open bills upturned to the downpour, waddled leisurely off as they flashed by. And then, they were out of the town, its rustling sycamores and its picturesque gable roofs left behind, and were climbing up the steep zigzag road towards Cranmore Common.

The gloom had deepened to dusk through which there now intermittently glared sharp, vivid flashes of lightning, while the deep growling bass of the thunder echoed nearer and nearer.

"Isn't this very unusual?" Leila asked as with soaked gloves she tore off her dripping and useless veil, and the car pointed up the steep ascent; "why it's almost tropical. I thought you never had very severe——"

Her sentence was cut short by a blinding white blaze and a simultaneous crash that seemed to crack and rend the air above and the earth beneath them. From far up the hillside there came instantly a rushing roar, like the sound of a torrent released, and a moment later a great tree trunk, waving its umbrageous arms, came whirling down, bearing with it an avalanche of boulders, stones and brushwood, and flung itself across the roadway before them. For a heartbeat only it halted, and then like a careering comet

with its tail of nebulae, plunged on again into the valley below.

Leila, dazed by the sudden, terrifying shock, was not aware for a moment that the car had come to a standstill not five yards from the path of the lightning-smitten tree. But with returning sensibility came not only a consciousness of their narrow escape, but an augmented admiration for the man whose coolness and efficiency in a most trying moment had been the means of averting what must otherwise have proved a fatal disaster.

Already the power was reapplied and the motor was once more beginning to move forward, but the roadway, drenched by the downpour, was becoming more treacherous at every revolution of the wheels, and the danger of side-slipping,

skidding at the turns especially, was growing momentarily more imminent.

Again the lightning blazed and again the accompanying detonation rang loudly, terrifyingly near.

Leila clutched Dickie's arm.

"It is foolhardy to go on," she pleaded, with breath bated; "we must find shelter somewhere—anywhere."

He felt her trembling. The shock had jangled her nerves. He had cast aside his lunettes, which had become blinded with the wet, and she saw now his lids lower, his lips compress and his face harden with a grim determination.

"There is a lodge at the top of the hill," he said, reassuringly. "We shall reach it in five minutes or less, going slowly as we must. We'll turn in there,

if you like, though the worst is over, I am sure."

She made no reply and they labored on over the soft ooze of the water-soaked road, slipping, now and then, and sliding as the gradient increased; while the rain continued its unceasing pour and the thunder and lightning kept up their deafening, blinding cannonade.

"That is Cranmore church," Dickie said, presently, as the summit of the hill came into view through the curtain of rain, and with it a stone church spire. "The village inn is just beyond, across the Common."

"No," Leila replied with decision; and even as she spoke, with a deft twist of the wheel, Blount, his face like carven granite, his mouth a straight thin line,

swerved the big car's course to the right and curved it swiftly in between the high stone pillars of a wide open gateway.

Another moment and he had swung himself out before a rather imposing, gray stone lodge, and had assisted Leila to the not very adequate shelter of its shallow door porch, overhung with vines now sodden and dripping. He reached his hand to the curious old wrought-brass knocker, but as he would have lifted it, the oaken door swung inward, and a cheery female voice issuing from the gloom within, cried:

"Step in, ma'am; and you, too, sir. It *is* a wild storm."

Leila was over the threshold in a second, but Blount stopped an instant to call to Felix.

"You'd better come, too, for a little. The car will be safe enough there."

It was very dark inside, save when the lightning, already less frequent, threw a lurid illumination through the windows, but the bustling old wife of the lodge-keeper said she would fetch candles in a minute and would light a fire on the hearth of the little parlor into which she ushered them, so that they might dry their clothes.

Leila had thrown off her wet dust-coat and was taking the hat pins from her hat, when Dickie, who had been nervously fidgeting about the room, started suddenly toward the door.

"Excuse me," he said, "I forgot——"

But at that moment the door opened and the stout, little old woman, with a

lighted candle in each hand, confronted him.

He made as if to turn back; then instantly changed his mind, and would have passed her, hurriedly, with averted face; but she blocked the way, staring, open-mouthed, her arms relaxed and the candles guttering and smoking as she allowed them to droop.

"Lord 'a' mercy!" she gasped, her amazement having found voice. "Lord 'a' mercy! Mr. George!" She caught her breath as he halted, and then blurted out: "Begging your pardon, my lord, but this *is* a surprise! And they saying as they couldn't find trace of your lordship in England nor America." She dropped to her knees and letting the candles slip to the floor on either side of her

"Welcome home, my lord! Welcome home to your own."
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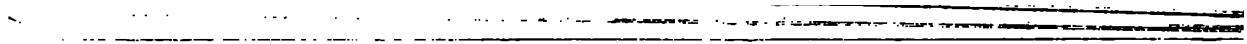

she caught one of Dickie's white hands between her own two pudgy red ones. "Welcome home, my lord!" she cried; "welcome home to your own, an' may the good God bless your lordship's coming."

For a quarter of a second Leila sat puzzled and wondering, but as the old woman knelt and her words came clear and distinct there was no mistaking the significance of the scene. This, then, was her husband's home—this place into which a Divine Providence had veritably driven her—and he had been recognized in the very act of avoiding recognition. She blamed herself, now, that she had insisted on stopping, that she had not consented to go on to the inn; to do which he had been so evidently anxious—since

coming here meant for him embarrassment.

"No, no, Janie," Richard was saying, kindly enough as he helped the woman to her feet. "No, no; you forget. It's not 'my lord,' and 'your lordship,' it's still only 'Mr. George.' And my place is not here, but out of England; anywhere away from here, in fact. We're only here, Janie, till the storm passes, and then we'll be on our way again."

But Janie was to be neither hushed nor discouraged.

"It's begging your lordship's pardon," she insisted, as she gathered up her candles, "but it's me that has the right of it, this time, my lord. Since yestereve they've been sending wires and cables and what not in search of you, my lord; and

it was at four this morning—four minutes after four, to be exact, that your lordship became the Right Honorable, the Earl of Hartsmere."

Leila saw his face go white even in the dim light of the candles.

"My brother?" he asked, his voice low and just a little strained. "The Earl? He is dead?"

"Yes, my lord. Very sudden, it was. His motor overturned and——"

"Good God!" he murmured; and then, without another word, he went into the passage.

Half an hour passed, during which Leila, busy with new thoughts, sat before the kindly blaze the lodge-keeper's wife had set alight on the hearth. Old Janie would have talked, but her visitor gave

her scant encouragement. A cuckoo clock in the corner chirped seven, and the Earl of Hartsmere stood again in the doorway.

"It is over," he said, "and we had best be going."

X

ON the steps of the hotel, Leila turned to the man whom she had married.

"I prefer to dine alone to-night," she said, quietly. "If you have anything to say to me, you may come to me after."

They were the first words she had spoken since leaving the lodge, and Dickie, of his own accord, rather than from the spell of her example, had preserved a like taciturnity, devoting all his thought and nervous energy, apparently, to the speeding and guiding of the motor, which he had caused to encompass the

twenty-two miles between the lodge-gates of Morhurst and Hyde Park Corner, in spite of rain-drenched roads, in very nearly record time. As she spoke now there was more of a suggestion of injury suffered and endured than of resentment in her tone. It was as though she were wounded and yet had set her teeth against revealing the ache of the wound.

Blount bowed his acquiescence. The plan was to him most acceptable, and he wondered whether she had not proposed it even more for his sake than her own. It was so in keeping with her habit of becoming intuitively possessed of his desires and then meeting them even before he had opportunity to express a preference. He appreciated her silence on the run back to town, too. It was what he

had hoped for as he had stood out in the wet under the dripping vines of the lodge porch, trying to realize the stupendous import of the tidings so unexpectedly and so bluntly conveyed. And, as he made his way to his own rooms, there swept in upon him again that all pervading, all absorbing sense of this woman's superlative sweetness of character—of her beauty of soul as well as her beauty of form and feature—of her eminent and entrancing desirability, and with it a bitter rebellion against the equivocality of his position which had suddenly taken on a new and embarrassing complication.

He dressed with more than his usual celerity, and then, having dismissed his man, sat down to continue his pondering. He was in no mood for dining. The

weight of the problems by which he was now confronted pressed too heavily upon him to admit of so much as a thought of physical hunger.

Meanwhile, in her own rooms, across the passage, Leila was going through much the same experience. On her part it was a coping with the dread horrors of disillusion. For several months now, ever since Prince Valori's visit to Verezzo, and her discovery of Lord Heatherly's portrait in the newspaper—her discovery that the man she had married was related to a peer—she had struggled to reconcile Blount's reticence regarding his family position, and the complications which it might entail, with the sense of honor with which she had chosen to endow him, despite all rumor to the con-

trary. She had been wont at first to disbelieve—to question at least the evidence which should have been clearly convincing—and then, when finally there was no longer room for such doubt, she had busied herself with the building of excuses.

But now the unexpected had happened, and they had reached a point where excuses seemed pitifully feeble and altogether inadequate to meet the situation. She was married to an Earl, and yet not married, because he had wed her under a name that was not his own and under circumstances and conditions which in the eyes of his world, at least, must appear so monstrous as to be outside the law. And from the comparative obscurity of a life such as had been hers she

must now be dragged, she and her strange alliance, into the full tide of that glare which beats upon the circles girding the English throne.

In spite of her perturbation she had given to the choice of her gown more than ordinary attention, and had at last selected one of rich black velvet, which tended to enhance her unusual pallor. She wore no jewels save two strings of diamonds, which served as shoulder straps and which sparkled now against the marble whiteness of her skin as she sat with her elbows upon the edge of the well-furnished dining table, her soft, round chin in her slender, yet dimpled hands, and stared unblinkingly thoughtful at the flame which peeped from under the pink shade of one of the candelabra.

A demi-tasse of Turkish coffee was before her, but she had merely sipped it; just as she had made only a pretence of eating.

So busy was she with her thoughts that time sped unheeded, and when a voice sounded behind her, she started, nervously affrighted, as one rudely awakened from slumber.

"I'm sorry if I disturbed you," Blount apologized, noticing the tremor that shook her as she raised her head and dropped her hands suddenly to the table. "If you'd prefer it, I'll come in again later."

She stood up, and as she faced him he was dazzled afresh by the rarely exquisite loveliness of her beauty. In her wonderful clear gray eyes, those magic mirrors of her emotions, there was a pathos

which, in combination with her unusual pallor and the delicately drooping corners of her expressive mouth, gave to her the marvelously moving charm of a living, breathing, yet idealized Madonna.

"No," she said, the gentle calm of her voice adding to the illusion. "I am quite ready. I fancy I dallied longer over dinner than I intended. Shall we go into the drawing room?"

He held the door open for her, and she passed him, a certain dignity in her carriage, and yet a certain solemnity utterly unlike her demeanor on any previous occasion that he could remember. Hitherto their intercourse had invariably been easy and spontaneous, and while it had never reached to freedom, in its broadest sense, it had been unhampered by noticeable re-

straint. Now the reverse of these conditions prevailed.

The evening had turned cool after the storm, and a chill breeze swept in at the open windows.

"Do you mind the draught?" Blount asked, solicitously, in an effort to relieve the tenseness of the moment, as they stood, both hesitant.

"No," Leila answered, "I could not bear the windows closed," and she sank down on a sofa, with a sensation of relief.

He drew up a chair near her and sat down, too. For a little space there was silence again, and then the man spoke:

"I haven't words to tell you how I deplore this turn of affairs," he said, with impressive seriousness."

Leila smiled, a little cynically.

"Isn't that rather unusual?" she asked, with sarcasm in her tone; "I fancied that it was what younger sons of peers always lived in hope of."

He winced at the coldness of her manner more than at the cruelty of her words.

"Did you?" he rejoined; voicing the question as he framed his reply. "It may be so in some cases. It might have been so in mine—nine months ago."

"If I have robbed you of the sweets of inheritance," she responded, "I am more than regretful. You should have avoided any such possibility."

"How avoided it?" he asked, quickly. "Not that you have robbed me."

"There was but one way."

He paused an instant before replying.

"You mean," he said, "that I should have declined your most generous offer?"

"I mean," she corrected, "that you should have given me the chance to withdraw it."

"But I did," he protested, with a tinge of indignation. "I warned you."

She laughed half-scornfully.

"You warned me. Yes, you told me what the world said of you, but you did not tell me what you were. You might have been the son of a hostler, for all I knew—or you told me—to the contrary."

"And I might have been the son of a king, for all you asked or cared!" Blount rejoined, warmly. "Only you felt pretty sure that the son of a king would not stoop to such a sordid arrangement."

Leila's eyes shone.

"I felt pretty sure that the son of a king, or the son of an earl, either, for that matter, would declare himself and scorn my presumption."

The man leaned forward. When he spoke his tone was contrite again.

"Leila," he said, "I dare say you are right. I should have told you. I was a blackguard not to have told you. But there were two lives between me and the title, and I thought—my God! You don't know what your temptation was! I'm sorry, more than sorry; but that is the worst of it. What good will the sorrow do? I see the awkwardness of it all. I see what we have to face. I've thought it all out, coolly and calmly. There are

just two courses; and between the two you must decide."

Leila listened with averted gaze. When she turned her eyes to him again there were tears on her lashes.

"I was unkind to reproach you, Dickie," she said, with a contrition equal to his own, "but I am nervously overwrought. I have been thinking, too; looking this way and that, and all I can see are embarrassment, scandal, disgrace."

"Embarrassment, possibly, yes," he rejoined, "but certainly not scandal; certainly not disgrace."

"I wish I could think so," Leila cried, nervously tapping the floor with the point of her slipper. "I wish you could make me see it."

Blount got up and taking his case from his pocket lighted a cigarette. Then he crossed to the chimney piece, where he stood resting an elbow on the mantel shelf.

"Our contract," he began with business-like precision, "has still three months to run. At the end of that time it may be concluded at the instance of either. Prior to that time there is no provision for its annulment. If during that period you prefer to remain Mrs. Richard Blount, there is still no reason why you should not do so, though it would hardly be feasible for us to continue in England. There are, however, other countries where we could, I am quite sure, for that space of time, at least, evade detection. If, however, during that

period, you should prefer to be known as the Countess of Hartsmere—and I may interpose that this would be my own preference—that is even more easy of accomplishment and would not involve leaving England, where it has been your desire to remain. But while neither alternative means either scandal or disgrace, both mean a violation of certain conditions of our contract, as I think we both understand it."

He paused, and Leila, with some impatience, rose from the sofa and stood facing him.

"Ah!" she cried, impetuously, "but you ignore the features out of which the scandal and disgrace would grow. You seem to forget the divorce; and you seem to

forget that you married me under a name which is not your own."

He dropped his cigarette into the fireplace and took a step towards her.

"No, no," he protested, with emphasis, "you do me an injustice. The name under which I married you was as much mine as yours was yours. George Richard Blount Heatherly. That is how it stands in Burke and Debrett, as you may very readily discover for yourself."

The announcement gave to Leila a distinct sense of relief, instantly evident in her expression, though her words evinced only humiliation.

"I beg your pardon. In finding excuses for my own folly I sought unfairly to put blame on you," she murmured.

"Your mistake was natural enough,"

he assured her, "but I am glad to be able to prove myself less of an ingrate than you fancied me."

"Ah!" she pleaded, smiling, "that is not kind of you. I never thought you an ingrate. But there is still the question of divorce," she pursued; "a divorce from Richard Blount would have been a comparatively easy matter to arrange; a divorce from the Earl of Hartsmere is quite another and very different thing."

He was standing close before her now, and, as she spoke, he took one of her hands in his.

"Leila," he said, very softly, "why need there be any divorce at all?"

In all their communion hitherto there had been a tacit avoidance of the personal note. Blount had regarded him-

self in honor bound to give no sign of his passion, and Leila had been permitted to gather absolutely no indication from either word or act of his that he held for her any sentiment other than one of purely platonic friendly interest, quite in accord with the nature of their agreement. The question, therefore, the passionate inflection with which it was voiced, and the accompanying warm pressure of his hand, came as an amazing surprise.

For a moment her eyelids drooped and her lips quivered. Then a suggestion came to her—born of self-doubt, rather than doubt of him—that he was making this proposition because he felt that honor demanded it, and she answered quickly:

"Because now, of all times, Dickie, you should be free."

"Free!" he repeated, his eyes on hers; "yes, that is true. I should be free—free to tell the woman I love how much I love her. But events have brought me that freedom, as no divorce could ever have done; events which have put into my hands something to offer to the woman I love; events which have placed me forever beyond reach of the imputation of fortune hunting, which has hitherto kept me dumb; events which will, I trust, by the grace of God, make it possible for me to rid myself of the shame of false charges, and re-establish my honor in my own land."

His voice rose high as he catalogued the advantages accruing from his inheritance; his cheeks flushed and his eyes brightened, and Leila, hearing and see-

ing, gazed her admiration. Very handsome he looked as he stood there before her, and very worthy any woman's love and loyalty. But she was determined there should be no sacrifice on his part. He should not make her the Countess of Hartsmere out of any mistaken sense of duty.

In all her life and travels she had met no man who so closely approached her ideal of what lover and husband should be; she had met no man whose glance and voice and touch moved her as did Richard Blount's; but she was not ready to give herself, alluring as was the prospect, until she was made sure that it was love and not principle which prompted the asking.

"You say it very well, Dickie," she

commented, with a quick smile, "very forcibly, and rather convincingly, just as I should expect you to say it. But are you quite sure you have taken everything into consideration?"

"Everything," he interjected, emphatically.

"But you don't know everything," she went on; "the world will want to learn all it can of your Countess, and you may find it more difficult to rid her name of false charges than to rid your own name of them. You have never heard what they say of me."

"Oh, but I have," he rejoined, smiling. "I have heard, but I don't believe. At Malaga I choked a certain rotter who dared to try to tell me something."

"Yes, I know," she replied; and he

stared, wondering. "I heard of that and I thank you for it. But there are others who will listen and believe. They will believe that poor old Mr. Merlin, who was my dear father's best friend, was more to me than a guardian, and gave me his name simply to cover my shame. That is the kind of story the world prefers to the truthful one that he married me on his death bed to guarantee me his fortune, and that, though married and widowed, I am still a maid." She colored as she spoke, but her gaze was clear and unfaltering.

"Leila," Blount implored, "don't. I beg of you, don't. I believe in you. What need to tell me that these calumnies are calumnies?"

"I never cared before, but now I do,"

she insisted. "The other day in Paris, the Count Valori let me know what the world had said of him and me, when we were in Switzerland, several years ago. It was a vile tale, and I called for you to eject him from the house on account of it. The world will repeat that, too, to my detriment, though——"

"Leila!" again he begged her, "I refuse to hear more. I know your virtue, I know your beauty, I know your worth. That you are Countess of Hartsmere will be refutation in itself of these lies. No one will dare——"

"Don't be too sure. Suppose they do?"

"I'll treat them as I treated Valori."

"But you can't be forever fighting for me," she objected.

"I can conceive of no pleasanter occupation," he laughed; "it will relieve the tedium of forever fighting for myself. For I must defend myself against the world's lies, too. You cannot fancy all it says of me. I have robbed women——"

"But you have not," Leila interrupted; "I have the proof that you have not."

A question came into his eyes before he made rejoinder.

"Do you mean that you heard that tale?" he asked, suddenly grown serious again. "They even dared tell it to you? But how, since you did not know that I was the Honorable George Heatherly?"

"But I did know. I knew ever since Prince Valori came to Verezzo, and saw your photograph."

He paused a moment, his eyes all tenderness, gazing into hers.

"What do you mean when you say you have proof?" he questioned.

From inside her corsage she drew out a sheet of paper folded small.

"This," she answered, and placed it in his hand.

During all their conversation he had retained his hold upon her fingers, but now he released them and stepped back to where the chandelier shed a brighter radiance, unfolding the paper as he did so.

For the brief but unmistakable exoneration which met his eyes, signed by the woman who had allowed the defamation to go abroad, he was not prepared, and the discovery, bringing with it a new

and varied flood of emotion—surprise, pleasure, appreciation—held him for a moment silent and spellbound.

"Lady Bathurst gave it to me at Cairo," Leila ventured in explanation.

Dickie turned to her, still perplexed and wondering.

"To you?" he queried. "But why? Why? What power on earth could ever have induced her?"

Leila smiled at his perplexity.

"I was the power," she said, quietly. "I demanded it."

The paper dropped from his hand to the floor. Three hurried steps and he was at her side, had taken her in his arms, and was holding her close to his wildly beating heart.

"You darling!" he whispered, passion-

ately, as he pressed his lips to hers, "you most wonderful of women! Most beautiful, most lovable and most desirable!"

Then, for a moment, he half released her, still holding her hands and stepping back a little that he might the better survey her.

"Never was there before, and never will there be again, such a Countess of Hartsmere," he declared, with adoration in his gaze.

"But——" began Leila, her face alight.

"There are no 'buts,'" he interrupted, drawing her to him once more. "What fools we were to talk of alternatives! A Divine Providence, wiser than we, has given us no choice. Where Love reigns, Divorce was never yet allowed to enter."

Again he kissed her willing mouth,

and as her arms stole up and folded about his neck, with face close to face, she said, a little shyly:

"Do you know, Dickie, I think I have loved you ever since that night at the Hammonds', when you played Perseus to my Andromeda."

THE END.